

THE SEMANTIC FEATURES OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH

Mushtariy Azimova Odiljon qizi
Kokand University Andijan Branch
Andijan, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Idiomatic expressions are an important component of the English language and play a significant role in effective communication. Unlike ordinary lexical units, idioms often convey meanings that cannot be fully understood from the literal meanings of their constituent words. This study examines the semantic features of English idiomatic expressions, focusing on non-compositionality, semantic opacity, metaphorical motivation, cultural specificity, and semantic variation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research analyzes examples of English idioms and relevant linguistic literature. The findings indicate that idioms function as fixed multiword expressions whose meanings are primarily based on figurative interpretation. The study also reveals that many idioms are influenced by conceptual metaphors and cultural experiences, while differing in their degree of semantic transparency. The results contribute to the understanding of lexical semantics and highlight the importance of idioms in language teaching, translation studies, and intercultural communication.

Keywords:

idioms, semantics, phraseology, metaphor, figurative meaning, English language

1. Introduction

Idiomatic expressions are fixed phrases whose meanings often extend beyond the literal meanings of their individual words. Because of their figurative nature, idioms are widely used in communication and have become an important area of study in semantics and phraseology. For example, the idiom kick the bucket means “to die,” a meaning that cannot be derived from its individual components.

Fernando (1996) defines idioms as conventionalized multiword expressions, while Moon (1998) describes them as fixed expressions with specialized meanings. The study of idioms is important for linguistics, language teaching, translation, and intercultural communication. Therefore, this study examines the semantic features of English idiomatic expressions, focusing on non-compositionality, semantic transparency and opacity, metaphorical motivation, cultural specificity, and semantic variation.

2. Literature Review

Idiomatic expressions have attracted considerable attention in semantics, phraseology, and cognitive linguistics because of their complex meanings. Fernando (1996) defines idioms as conventionalized multiword expressions whose meanings cannot be fully predicted from their components, while Moon (1998) describes them as fixed semantic units.

Studies suggest that speakers often access idiomatic meanings directly rather than through literal interpretation (Gibbs, 1994). Cognitive linguists further argue that many idioms are motivated by conceptual metaphors that shape human thought and experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010). In addition, Langlotz (2006) emphasizes that idioms vary in their degree of semantic motivation.

Another key aspect of idiom research is semantic transparency. Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994) distinguish between transparent idioms, whose meanings can be partly inferred, and opaque idioms, whose meanings are less predictable. These perspectives provide the theoretical basis for analyzing the semantic features of English idiomatic expressions.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the semantic features of English idiomatic expressions. The data consist of commonly used English idioms selected from linguistic literature, phraseological dictionaries, and previous semantic studies.

The research applies descriptive analysis, semantic interpretation, and comparative analysis to explore the relationship between literal and figurative meanings and to compare different types of idioms. In addition, a literature review is used to synthesize relevant theoretical perspectives.

The analysis focuses on five key semantic features: non-compositionality, semantic transparency and opacity, metaphorical motivation, cultural specificity, and semantic variation. These dimensions provide a framework for understanding the semantic nature of English idiomatic expressions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Non-Compositionality as a Defining Semantic Feature

Non-compositionality is a key feature of idiomatic expressions. Unlike ordinary phrases, the meaning of an idiom often cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual words. For example, kick the bucket means “to die,” spill the beans means “to reveal a secret,” and bite the bullet means “to face a difficult situation courageously.”

These examples show that idioms function as single semantic units whose meanings extend beyond their constituent parts. According to Fernando (1996), this non-compositional nature distinguishes idioms from ordinary phrases. It also enhances communication by allowing speakers to express complex ideas in a concise and vivid way.

Table 1. Comparison of Literal and Idiomatic Meanings in English Idioms

Idiom	Literal Meaning	Idiomatic Meaning
Kick the bucket	kick a bucket	to die
Spill the beans	spill beans	reveal a secret
Break the ice	break ice	start communication

4.2. Semantic Transparency and Opacity

Idioms vary in how much their meanings may be deduced from literal interpretations, despite the fact that many of them are highly non-compositional. Semantic transparency and semantic opacity are frequently used to characterize this phenomenon.

Transparent idioms maintain a relatively clear connection between literal and figurative meanings. Examples include:

- Keep an eye on (to watch carefully)
- See the light (to understand)
- Lose one's head (to panic)

In some situations, conceptual connections with the literal meaning allow for some access to the metaphorical meaning.

In contrast, opaque idioms provide little indication of their figurative interpretation:

- Kick the bucket (to die)
- Red herring (a misleading clue)
- Pull someone's leg (to tease)

These idioms are more challenging for language learners to comprehend since the connection between literal and metaphorical meanings is much less clear.

The results corroborate the categorization put forward by Nunberg et al. (1994), who contend that idioms fall on a spectrum from completely opaque to fully transparent. Different levels of interpretability and semantic drive are reflected on this continuum.

4.3. Metaphorical Motivation in English Idioms

Conceptual analogies that influence human experience and thought are the foundation of many English idioms. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) assert that metaphor is a basic cognitive mechanism rather than just a stylistic artifice.

The analysis reveals several recurring conceptual metaphors in English idiomatic expressions.

The metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY appears in idioms such as:

- At a crossroads
- On the right track
- Reach a dead end

These expressions conceptualize life experiences in terms of movement along a path.

Similarly, the metaphor ANGER IS HEAT is reflected in idioms such as:

- Blow one's top
- Hot under the collar
- Make someone's blood boil

These examples demonstrate how abstract emotional experiences are understood through physical sensations associated with heat.

The metaphor SUCCESS IS UP appears in expressions such as:

- Rise to the top
- Move up in the world
- Climb the ladder of success

According to Kövecses (2010), these metaphorical patterns are systematic rather than accidental. They reflect shared cognitive structures that influence the development of idiomatic meaning.

4.4. Cultural Specificity of Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions are closely linked to culture and often reflect the values and experiences of a speech community. For example, barking up the wrong tree means making a wrong assumption, while let the cat out of the bag refers to revealing a secret. Because idioms are culturally bound, they can be difficult for language learners and translators. Therefore, understanding idioms requires both linguistic and cultural knowledge and provides insight into the relationship between language and culture.

4.5. Polysemy and Semantic Variation in Idioms

Although idioms are generally fixed expressions, many show semantic flexibility and contextual variation. For example, over the moon expresses extreme happiness, while break the ice can refer to initiating conversation or reducing tension in a social or professional setting.

These examples demonstrate that idiomatic meanings are influenced by context. As Glucksberg (2001) notes, speakers rely on contextual information to interpret idioms appropriately. This flexibility allows idioms to remain relevant in different communicative situations while preserving their core meanings, highlighting the dynamic nature of idiomatic semantics.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the semantic features of English idiomatic expressions, focusing on non-compositionality, semantic transparency and opacity, metaphorical motivation, cultural specificity, and semantic variation. The findings show that idioms are unique linguistic units whose meanings often extend beyond the literal meanings of their components.

The analysis highlights the role of conceptual metaphors and cultural knowledge in shaping idiomatic meaning. It also demonstrates that, despite their fixed nature, idioms may exhibit contextual flexibility and semantic variation. Overall, idioms represent an important intersection

of language, cognition, and culture. Further research may explore their use across languages, cultures, and communication contexts.

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