

SEMANTIC PROPERTIES AND MEANING DEVELOPMENT OF
PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: This study investigates the semantic properties and historical development of English idiomatic expressions, emphasizing their non-compositional nature, semantic opacity, and reliance on figurative mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual blending. By analyzing a corpus of approximately 500 idioms from dictionaries, literary texts, and digital corpora, the research identifies patterns of semantic flexibility, historical evolution, and contextual usage. The study demonstrates that idioms are dynamic linguistic units that reflect cultural values, social norms, and cognitive processes, making them essential for effective communication, language learning, and translation. Insights from this research highlight the importance of understanding idiomatic expressions for both linguistic theory and practical applications in pedagogy and intercultural communication.

Keywords: English idioms, Phraseological units, Semantic properties, Figurative language, Metaphor, Metonymy, Meaning evolution, Language acquisition, Translation, Cultural context

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions, or phraseological units, are a fundamental aspect of any language, providing speakers with the ability to convey complex ideas, emotions, and cultural nuances in a concise and figurative manner (1, 2). In English, idiomatic expressions are pervasive across both spoken and written forms, ranging from everyday conversational phrases such as “*break the ice*” to more literary constructs like “*bated breath*” (3, 4). Understanding the semantic properties and historical development of these expressions is essential not only for linguists but also for language learners and translators, as idioms often carry meanings that are not immediately deducible from the individual words they contain (5, 6).

The semantic properties of English idiomatic expressions involve several distinctive characteristics. First, idioms often exhibit non-compositionality, meaning that their overall meaning cannot be inferred directly from the meanings of the constituent words (7). For example, the expression “*kick the bucket*” is understood to mean “to die,” rather than a literal action involving a bucket (8). Second, idioms frequently show semantic opacity, where the figurative meaning is culturally and contextually bound, requiring familiarity with the language and its social conventions (9). Third, idiomatic expressions may evolve over time, reflecting historical, social, and cultural changes in the language community (10). This evolution can result in shifts in meaning, usage, or connotation, making the study of idioms a dynamic field within semantics and lexicology (1, 3).

The development of idiomatic expressions in English is influenced by various linguistic and extralinguistic factors. Historical events, literature, folklore, and cross-cultural interactions contribute to the creation and adaptation of idioms (2, 5). Moreover, cognitive mechanisms

such as metaphorical mapping, metonymy, and conceptual blending play a crucial role in shaping the figurative meanings of these expressions (6, 7). By examining the semantic structure and historical trajectory of idioms, researchers gain insight into both linguistic patterns and the cultural worldview embedded within the language (4, 8).

The aim of this article is to analyze the semantic properties and meaning development of English idiomatic expressions. The study focuses on identifying patterns of non-compositionality, semantic opacity, and figurative mechanisms, as well as tracing the historical evolution and contemporary usage of selected idioms (9, 10). Additionally, the research explores the implications of idiomatic expressions for language teaching, translation, and cross-cultural communication (1, 2).

By investigating the semantic and historical dimensions of English idioms, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between language, thought, and culture, highlighting the significance of phraseological units in conveying nuanced meaning and reflecting the cultural identity of English-speaking communities (3, 5).

Methods and Materials

This study on the semantic properties and meaning development of English idiomatic expressions employs a descriptive-analytical methodology that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis. The research is based on a carefully compiled corpus of contemporary and historical English idioms, which includes approximately 500 expressions drawn from authoritative dictionaries, academic publications, literary works, and digital language resources. These idioms cover a wide range of thematic categories, including everyday life, emotions, social interactions, work, and literature, ensuring a representative sample for semantic and historical analysis.

The materials for the study include authoritative phraseological references such as The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms, Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Idioms, which provide standard definitions, usage examples, and etymological information. Literary and historical texts from the eighteenth century to the present day were examined to trace the historical development and semantic shifts of selected idiomatic expressions. Digital corpora, including the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English, were utilized to analyze frequency, contextual usage, and semantic variation in modern English.

The methodological framework of the research consists of several stages. Initially, idiomatic expressions were identified and selected based on frequency, cultural relevance, and thematic diversity. Each selected idiom underwent detailed semantic analysis to examine non-compositionality, figurative mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual blending, semantic opacity, and polysemy. Historical and diachronic analysis was conducted to identify changes in meaning, connotation, and usage over time, drawing from literary works, historical texts, and etymological studies. Quantitative analysis was performed using corpus data to determine the frequency of idiom usage, their contextual distribution, and patterns of semantic change. Comparative analysis between historical and contemporary usage was also

carried out to highlight the evolution of meaning and the influence of cultural factors on idiomatic expressions.

By integrating these methods and materials, the study provides a systematic and thorough examination of English idiomatic expressions, offering insights into their semantic characteristics, historical development, and the role they play in reflecting the cultural and cognitive aspects of the English language. The approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of how idioms convey complex meanings, adapt over time, and maintain relevance in both historical and modern linguistic contexts.

Analysis

The analysis of English idiomatic expressions reveals several core semantic characteristics that distinguish them from literal language. One of the most prominent features is non-compositionality, where the overall meaning of an idiom cannot be directly inferred from the meanings of its constituent words. Expressions such as “*spill the beans*”, “*kick the bucket*”, and “*let the cat out of the bag*” exemplify this phenomenon, requiring the speaker and listener to rely on shared cultural knowledge rather than literal interpretation. Non-compositionality not only creates semantic opacity but also highlights the figurative and metaphorical nature of idiomatic expressions, which often embed abstract concepts, social norms, and cultural references.

Another key feature observed is semantic flexibility. While idioms maintain a core figurative meaning, their usage can vary depending on context, register, and speaker intention. For instance, the idiom “*break the ice*” can refer to easing social tension in casual conversation, but it may also be adapted metaphorically in literary or professional contexts to signify initiating communication or collaboration. This flexibility demonstrates the dynamic nature of idiomatic expressions and their ability to evolve semantically over time, accommodating changes in society, culture, and language use.

Metaphor and metonymy are central mechanisms in the formation and interpretation of idioms. Conceptual metaphors such as “*time is money*” or “*life is a journey*” underpin numerous idiomatic expressions, allowing abstract ideas to be represented through concrete imagery. Metonymic relationships, on the other hand, often rely on contiguity or association, as seen in expressions like “*lend a hand*” or “*head of the table*”. These cognitive processes illustrate how idioms encode cultural and experiential knowledge, making them an essential component of the linguistic and conceptual framework of English.

The historical and diachronic analysis of idioms reveals patterns of semantic change and adaptation. Many idiomatic expressions in modern English originate from Old and Middle English, literary works, folklore, proverbs, and historical events. Over time, the meanings of these idioms have shifted, broadened, or narrowed, reflecting changes in society, values, and communicative needs. For example, the idiom “*bite the bullet*”, which originally referred to enduring a surgical procedure without anesthesia, has generalized to indicate facing any painful or challenging situation with courage. Similarly, idioms such as “*by and large*” have undergone semantic stabilization, retaining figurative meaning while adapting to contemporary usage.

Quantitative analysis of corpus data supports these observations, indicating that idiomatic expressions with high cultural salience and frequent usage exhibit greater semantic stability, whereas less common idioms are more susceptible to semantic shift or obsolescence. Contextual analysis further shows that idioms often carry connotative and pragmatic meaning that extends beyond the literal or figurative sense, influencing tone, politeness, humor, and emphasis in communication.

The study also identifies the role of idioms in language acquisition and translation. Due to their non-literal nature and cultural specificity, idiomatic expressions present challenges for second-language learners and translators. Understanding idioms requires not only lexical knowledge but also cultural competence and awareness of semantic nuances. Effective translation often demands finding equivalent idiomatic expressions in the target language or providing explanatory paraphrases that convey the intended meaning while preserving the stylistic and cultural context.

In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that English idiomatic expressions are complex linguistic units characterized by non-compositionality, semantic flexibility, and figurative mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy. Their historical evolution reflects cultural, social, and linguistic changes, while their usage in contemporary contexts underscores their functional and communicative significance. Idioms serve as a vital tool for conveying nuanced meaning, enriching language, and embedding cultural knowledge within linguistic expression, making them an essential focus for linguistic research, language teaching, and translation studies.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the intricate relationship between language, culture, and cognition as reflected in English idiomatic expressions. The non-compositional nature of idioms confirms that understanding them requires more than literal translation, emphasizing the importance of cultural and contextual knowledge. Idioms not only encode figurative meanings but also reflect social values, norms, and historical experiences, thereby acting as a mirror of the cultural and cognitive framework of English-speaking communities. The analysis of idiomatic flexibility reveals that expressions evolve over time to adapt to shifts in social communication, technology, and literature, demonstrating the dynamic and living nature of language.

Metaphorical and metonymic mechanisms, identified as core components of idiomatic formation, indicate that cognition plays a central role in shaping meaning. Conceptual metaphors such as “*life is a journey*” or “*time is money*” allow abstract notions to be conveyed through tangible imagery, facilitating comprehension and memorability. The integration of historical sources and corpus analysis further confirms that idiomatic expressions are not static; they undergo semantic shifts that can broaden, narrow, or modify meaning based on social, cultural, and linguistic influences. This process of semantic evolution underscores the adaptability of idiomatic expressions in maintaining relevance across generations.

The discussion also highlights practical implications for language teaching and translation. Idioms pose particular challenges for non-native speakers due to semantic opacity and cultural specificity, necessitating instructional strategies that combine lexical, contextual, and cultural

education. For translators, understanding the figurative mechanisms and historical development of idioms is crucial for producing accurate and culturally sensitive translations. Techniques such as finding functional equivalents, explanatory paraphrasing, or retaining idiomatic forms with contextual clarification are essential to preserve meaning and stylistic nuance.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the pedagogical importance of idioms as tools for enriching language proficiency and promoting intercultural competence. Exposure to idiomatic expressions enhances learners' ability to interpret figurative language, recognize cultural references, and produce contextually appropriate speech and writing. Corpus-based analysis and historical tracing provide additional insights into frequency, contextual usage, and semantic trends, offering practical guidance for curriculum design and learning materials.

In summary, the discussion confirms that English idiomatic expressions are multifaceted linguistic units shaped by cognitive, cultural, and historical factors. Their semantic properties, mechanisms of figurative meaning, and evolutionary trajectories provide valuable insights for linguistics, language acquisition, and translation studies. Recognizing the dynamic interplay between meaning, context, and culture in idioms is essential for both theoretical research and practical applications, highlighting the enduring significance of phraseological units in understanding and using the English language effectively.

Conclusion

This study has examined the semantic properties and meaning development of English idiomatic expressions, highlighting their complex and multifaceted nature. The analysis demonstrates that idioms are characterized by non-compositionality, semantic opacity, and reliance on figurative mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, and conceptual blending. These properties render idiomatic expressions a unique linguistic tool for conveying abstract ideas, cultural values, and social norms in a concise and figurative manner.

The historical and diachronic examination of idioms reveals that they evolve in response to societal, cultural, and linguistic changes. Some expressions undergo semantic broadening, narrowing, or shifts in connotation, while others retain stable meanings across generations. This dynamic process underscores the adaptability of idiomatic expressions and their ability to maintain relevance in contemporary communication.

The discussion emphasizes the cognitive and cultural significance of idioms, illustrating how they reflect conceptual metaphors, cultural experiences, and social practices. For language learners, idioms provide a valuable resource for understanding figurative language and enhancing communicative competence. In translation, idiomatic expressions require careful consideration of cultural context and meaning, with strategies such as functional equivalence, paraphrasing, or explanatory notes ensuring accurate and contextually appropriate rendering.

Overall, the study confirms that English idiomatic expressions are essential components of the language, embodying both linguistic creativity and cultural knowledge. Their semantic complexity, historical evolution, and practical applications in teaching, learning, and translation highlight their enduring importance in understanding and using English effectively. The

findings contribute to a deeper appreciation of phraseological units as dynamic, culturally embedded, and cognitively significant elements of the English language.

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