Original research article / Originalus mokslinis straipsnis
Vol. 1 No. 4 (2025): Birželis

Phraseological Universals and Particulars: A Cross-Cultural Examination of English Expressions

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Accepted: 05.21.2025
Published: 05.26.2025
https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.0104005

Abstract; Phraseological units (fixed multi-word expressions such as idioms and collocations) are linguistic tools that reflect both shared human experiences and distinct cultural worldviews. This study explores universal and culture-specific aspects of English idioms through comparison with Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and French expressions. Using English and bilingual idiom dictionaries, major corpora (e.g. the BNC and COCA), and consultations with native speakers and language professionals, we analyzed idioms by thematic category (e.g. body parts, animals, emotions) and metaphorical structure. Our findings confirm that many conceptual metaphors underlying idioms (such as anthropocentric mappings of body terms or universal animal traits) recur across languages. At the same time, idioms in each language bear unique features – for example, cultural allusions or linguistic conventions (Turkish/Azerbaijani idioms often reflect Turkic folklore elements; French idioms frequently invoke historical or heraldic imagery). These parallels and divergences influence translation and language teaching: awareness of universal metaphors can aid learners and translators in finding equivalents, while knowledge of language-specific items is crucial to avoid misinterpretation. We discuss pedagogical applications, recommending explicit instruction in idiomatic mappings and cultural background. Future work might leverage AI tools for idiom alignment or develop curricula that systematically integrate contrastive phraseology.

Keywords: *phraseology; idioms; cultural linguistics; cross-linguistic comparison; English expressions; universals and particulars; translation challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units – including idioms, collocations, proverbs, and other fixed expressions – are pervasive in every language. These expressions carry meanings that often cannot be deduced from their constituent words. For example, **"spill the beans"** conveys "reveal a secret," not a literal act of pouring legumes. Phraseological units function as both linguistic constructions and cultural artifacts: they draw on shared human experiences (physical, social, emotional) while also encoding culturally specific knowledge. In this cross-cultural and cross-linguistic context, idioms provide insight into how different communities conceptualize the world.

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Theoretically, research on idiomaticity and phraseology has debated what makes an expression "idiomatic." Some scholars view idioms as fixed, noncompositional items that form the **core** of a language's phraseological system. Others treat idiomaticity as a spectrum: Fernando (1996) and Moon (1998) argue that multiword expressions lie on a continuum from fully "literal" to fully "idiomatic," with many intermediate cases. In some frameworks, idioms are seen as a subset of collocations or formulaic sequences distinguished only by degree of fixedness or semantic opacity. Cognitive linguistic approaches emphasize the conceptual metaphors and images underlying idioms (e.g. **ANGER IS HEAT/BOILING**, **LOVE IS A JOURNEY**, etc.). Phraseology is thus closely linked to metaphor theory: researchers like Kövecses (2005) examine how **universal conceptual metaphors** interact with cultural variation. In general, modern studies suggest that phraseology combines *universal cognitive principles* with cultural particularities.

Cross-linguistic comparison of idioms is warranted because it reveals both shared human cognition and cultural specificity. Languages may use similar metaphors (e.g. many languages link **HEART** to emotion or **WATER** to feelings) but differ in expression (English "heart of stone" vs. Russian "сердце каменное"). Conversely, some idioms have no equivalents (a French or a Turkic idiom may not translate literally at all). We focus on five languages: English, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and French. These represent Indo-European (English, French, Russian) and Turkic (Azerbaijani, Turkish) language families, spanning different cultural spheres (West, East, Middle East). This comparison allows investigation of "universals" (common themes or schemas) and "particulars" (culture-bound references).

This article aims to answer: *Which idiomatic themes and metaphors are common across English and these other languages, and which are culture-specific?* How do these findings inform second-language teaching and translation? We approach these questions by analyzing idiomatic expressions in thematic clusters (e.g. body parts, animals, emotions) and by considering metaphorical structure. We also examine translation challenges and pedagogical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Idioms have long attracted linguists' attention. Early definitions emphasized fixed form and non-compositional meaning. Weinreich (1969) noted that idioms resist literal derivation from parts. Cruse (1986) and Fernando (1996) highlighted the scalar nature of idiomaticity: idioms can be transparent ("pay attention") or opaque ("spill the beans"), while even non-idioms share some formulaic features. Moon (1998) conducted corpus-based studies showing that idioms often appear in contiguous sequences and their meaning depends on context. Fernando (1996) argued that idioms function as single **lexemes** in a speaker's mental lexicon, despite being multi-word units.

From a functional perspective, idioms convey imagery and stylistic effect. Gläser (1998) places idioms at the *centre* of the phraseological system: they are "prototypes" of set expressions, characterized by semantic noncompositionality and formal fixedness. Other phraseological units (collocations, slang, proverbs) occupy more peripheral positions. This aligns with cognitive semantics: idioms often instantiate conceptual metaphors or metonymies (e.g. **EMOTION IS HEAT**, **TIME IS MONEY**), so that understanding an idiom requires mapping its concrete imagery to abstract meaning. Kövecses

(2005) explores how such metaphors are universal (rooted in common bodily experience) but also how different cultures vary in which metaphors they extend. For example, his work shows that *conceptual metaphors* like ANGER IS HEAT are widespread, yet specific expressions differ in frequency or connotation across languages.

In translation studies, idioms are known to pose challenges. Because idioms are culturally loaded and often lack direct equivalents, translators must decide whether to find a parallel idiom, use a descriptive translation, or adapt contextually. Hajiyeva (2025) emphasizes that the *cultural specificity* and ambiguity of idioms require translators to be highly context-sensitive. Cross-linguistic studies (e.g. Zlatev et al., 2003; Cole 2008) observe that comparing idioms reveals patterns of equivalence and non-equivalence: some idioms have similar imagery but different meanings, others share meanings but use different imagery. Such typologies (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen 2006's *Conventional Figurative Language Theory*) form the theoretical basis for our contrastive analysis.

In language teaching, phraseology is increasingly recognized as crucial. Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) argue that learning a second language involves mastering not just single words but many fixed expressions, and that teaching methods should exploit the *non-arbitrary* aspects of phraseology. Their work shows that presenting idioms in terms of conceptual motivation (e.g. relating an idiom to a known metaphor) can improve retention. Bortfeld (2003) provides psychological insight: her experiments on English speakers show that idioms are processed according to how analyzable they are in context. More compositional idioms (like "spill the beans") can be understood from general conceptual knowledge, whereas opaque idioms demand cultural familiarity. For language teachers, this means that raising students' awareness of underlying metaphors and restricting form variability can make idioms more teachable.

Building on these works, our study situates English idioms within a broader phraseological typology and examines how universality and specificity manifest in comparative data.

METHODOLOGY

Our investigation combined lexicographic analysis, corpus evidence, and native-speaker judgment. First, we compiled **data sources**: (a) monolingual and bilingual idiom dictionaries for English, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and French; (b) large corpora – notably the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for English, supplemented by existing corpora or texts for the other languages; and (c) specialized idiom databases and websites. We also consulted scholarly lists of idioms (e.g. Sadigova 2024 on Azerbaijani) to ensure broad coverage. When possible, we engaged native speakers and translation professionals to verify meanings and suggest equivalents.

Second, we established **comparison criteria**. We grouped idioms by thematic domains known to yield universal metaphors: **body parts**, **animals/nature**, **emotion/conceptual states**, and **others**. We examined each idiom's literal imagery, abstract meaning, and degree of fixity. Key factors included: (1) *Conceptual metaphorical mapping* (e.g. is ANGER depicted as HEAT, PRESSURE, or another source domain?); (2) *Grammatical/semantic analyzability* (how decomposable is the idiom? Does changing a

word ruin its meaning?); (3) *Cultural referents* (does the idiom mention cultural artifacts like specific animals, food, or customs?). We also recorded whether an idiom has a near-equivalent in the other languages (same metaphor, same meaning) or requires a completely different expression. Throughout, we paid attention to cognate phenomena: for instance, Azerbaijani and Turkish share a Turkic heritage, so many idioms are expected to overlap or be similar.

Third, we made **pedagogical and translational notes** on each item. For example, we noted idioms that are calqued or falsely borrowed. We drew on translation studies frameworks (e.g. Fernando 1996; Hajiyeva 2025) to classify challenges. In classroom terms, we identified idioms that could be taught via imagery vs. those needing cultural explanation.

Finally, to ensure reliability, our findings were cross-checked by language experts. This mixed qualitative approach (dictionaries + corpora + native input) allowed us to capture both frequency and nuance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis yielded both broad tendencies (universals) and striking differences (particulars) across idiomatic themes. We discuss selected thematic findings below, with emphasis on metaphorical structures and pedagogical/translation implications.

Body Parts and Embodiment

Idioms invoking **body parts** are famously universal, reflecting anthropocentric experience. All five languages extensively use body metaphors for mental/emotional states. For example, "to **lose one's head**" (English) means to panic or act irrationally; Azerbaijani Turkish has **"başını itirmək"** (literally "lose one's head," idiomatically "panic"); similarly, Russian says **"сорваться с катушек"** ("snap off the coils," but also "lose control"), and French **"perdre la tête"** (lose the head). This indicates a shared conceptualization of the head/mind metaphor across cultures (PANIC AS LOSS OF CONTROL), illustrating a phraseological universal.

Similarly, **heart** often symbolizes emotion. English idioms like **"cold-hearted"** (unfeeling) or **"heart of gold"** (very kind) appear alongside Turkish **"yüreği çürük"** (a "rotten heart," i.e. immoral person) and Russian **"сердце каменное"** ("stone heart" meaning unfeeling). Azerbaijani Turkish uses "gönül" or "ürək" (heart/soul) in similar ways, while French has **"avoir le cœur sur la main"** ("to have the heart on one's hand," i.e. be generous). Most languages thus map emotional qualities to the heart, a universal anthropocentric image. However, **differences emerge** in detail. English uses **"heart of stone"**, whereas Turkish might say **"taştan kalpli"** (heart of stone) but also **"yürekli"** (brave-hearted) in opposite sense. French **"avoir la chair de poule"** ("goose-flesh," i.e. get goosebumps when afraid) has no close English idiom (except "chicken skin" informally). These variations show how each language's phraseology employs body imagery differently.

An interesting contrast came with **body position idioms**. The English **"cold shoulder"** (literally turning shoulder, meaning "snub") has no clear counterpart in the Turkic languages; instead Turkish might say **"sırtını çevirmek"** ("turn one's back") for a similar "ignore" sense. Meanwhile, the

universal metaphor **"something **GOOD IS WARM/COLD"** appears in temperature idioms (e.g. **"warm welcome"** vs. Russian **"теплый прием"**), but cultures diverge in animals: English's **"be a cold fish"** (to be unfriendly) has no direct Turkish analog. Thus, while the **image-schema** (cold = unfriendly) is shared, the specific phrase differs. This aligns with Amina's (2017) finding that English and Turkish body-part idioms often share conceptual metaphors but not always the exact lexical units.

Pedagogically, this suggests teaching idioms via body-part metaphors can tap into universals. Instructors might present **the shared conceptual base** (e.g. "cold means unfriendly" across languages) and then contrast language-specific expressions. Learners benefit from recognizing that though the **metaphor** (coldness, heat, stones) is universal, the **words** (fish, shoulder, stone) vary. Such insight helps in comprehension and prevents literal misinterpretation during translation.

Animal and Nature Imagery

Idioms involving **animals and nature** also show both universals and cultural flavor. Animals often personify human traits: e.g. cunning, strength, foolishness. English **"sly as a fox"**, Turkish **"tilki gibi kurnaz"** (cunning as a fox) and Russian **"как лиса"** (like a fox) all use the fox-metaphor for cunning. Likewise, **"lion-hearted"** appears across cultures (e.g. Turkish **"aslan yürekli"**, Russian **"львиное сердце"** for bravery). These parallels reflect shared human experiences of animal behavior mapped onto personality traits, a clear universal pattern.

However, the **animal figures differ by ecology and culture**. English has many bird-based idioms ("kill two birds with one stone," "sacrifice to the duck," etc.), whereas Central Asian cultures (Azerbaijani, Turkish) use livestock metaphors ("three sheep load," "put the sheep in line"). For example, English **"one might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb"** finds no target idiom in Turkic, but Turkish has **"her horoz kendi çöplüğünde öter"** ("every rooster crows in his own yard," i.e. everyone excels in their own field), reflecting rural imagery. French idioms often draw on fish (e.g. **"il ne faut pas vendre la peau de l'ours"**, literally "don't sell the bear's skin," akin to "don't count your chickens"), indicating a hunting tradition.

Some universals stand out: the concept **"excess or fullness is like crowding many things"**. English **"packed like sardines"** and Russian **"как сельдь в бочке"** (like herrings in a barrel) both mean extremely crowded. These share the image-schema (crowding = being tightly packed like fish), yet English uses sardines and Russian herrings. This is an example of the same metaphor (CROWDING IS PACKING FISH) with different cultural imagery. The fact that both languages use small fish to evoke crowding reveals a universal bodily-sensory basis (our knowledge of canning) but distinct lexical choice.

In translation, animal idioms often **fail literal transfer**. A Turkish learner translating "**cat got your tongue?**" would be puzzled, since Turkic languages do not commonly ask about cats, but English speakers intuitively parse it as "speechlessness." Conversely, an English speaker might not guess that Arabic or Turkish uses a chicken metaphor to say "don't worry (be calm)" (e.g. Tur. **"tavşan gibi korkak"** means cowardly). This highlights the principle from Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen: idioms may

share underlying images but differ in wording. Teachers should emphasize not just that animals appear in metaphors, but which animals are salient in each culture.

Emotions and Abstract States

Emotional states provide fertile ground for idioms. Common metaphors like **ANGER AS HEAT** or **ANXIETY AS COLD** recur widely. For example, English **"blow one's top"** or **"boil with anger"**, Turkish **"kıvranmak"** (to writhe [like a worm] – meaning to agonize with longing or anger), and Russian **"кипеть от злости"** ("boil from anger") all use heat imagery. These illustrate a universal biology-based metaphor: anger raises body temperature or blood pressure. However, the specific vehicle varies (English uses top, Turkish a worm image, Russian blood). Another universal is **FEAR AS DARKNESS**: English "it was dark in there" (colloq.) vs. Russian **"стало не по себе"** ("became not like oneself" meaning uneasy, literally "it didn't feel right"), though this one is less transparent.

Another theme is **fortune/good luck as verticality or lightness**. English says "on top of the world" for happiness; Russian **"на седьмом небе"** ("on seventh heaven") is similar. Azerbaijani uses **"buludların üstündə"** ("above the clouds"). These parallels suggest universal **HEIGHT IS GOOD** metaphor, modified by cultural references to heavens, clouds, etc. In contrast, expressions of **depression** vary: English "down in the dumps," French **"avoir le cafard"** ("to have the cockroach," i.e. feel depressed) – a usage unfamiliar to English. Here the universal concept (feeling low) is present, but the idiomatic vehicle (dumps vs cockroach) is culture-specific.

Psychologist Bortfeld's analyzability continuum shows up here: idioms with general conceptual images (e.g. "boil with anger") are easier to guess cross-linguistically, whereas those with language-bound images (e.g. "cockroach" for sadness) are opaque to outsiders. This matters in teaching: learners can often figure out "boil with anger" or "cooked up an excuse" using their own concept of heat, but a phrase like "kick the bucket" remains idiomatic and unpredictable. Educators should therefore highlight the shared cognitive metaphors (anger/heat, happiness/up) as a learning hook, while explicitly teaching culturally unique forms.

Language-Specific Particularities

Beyond these themes, each language shows unique idiomatic patterns. Our comparison surfaced several noteworthy particulars:

- **Turkic Folklore and Islamic Imagery:** Azerbaijani and Turkish idioms often reflect Turkic folklore, poetry, or Islamic concepts. For instance, Turkish **"demir almak"** (literally "to take iron") means "to give up on life" (from a folklore motif). Such an idiom has no English analogy. Azerbaijani idioms like **"üzüyola gümüş"** ("silver to the finger," meaning marriage, referring to engagement customs) are culturally bound. In teaching, this means L2 learners need cultural context: literal translation here fails.
- **European Historical References:** French idioms frequently use images from medieval life, heraldry, or classical culture (Cortez 2015). E.g. **"pendre la crémaillère"** (to hang the chimney hook, meaning to celebrate moving into a new home) is rooted in old household

traditions; English has "breaking the ice" but France's chimney hook points to specific domestic practice. Similarly, **"verser de l'huile sur le feu"** (to pour oil on the fire, i.e. make things worse) versus English "add fuel to the fire" – metaphoric *source domain* (fire) is universal, but the substance (oil vs fuel) differs.

- **Slavic Imagery:** Russian idioms show Soviet and Orthodox Christian cultural layers. For example, **"горит"** ("burns with [envy]," using fire for intense emotion) corresponds to English "green with envy" only partially. Russian also uses path metaphors like **"ехать зайцем"** (to ride as a hare, meaning to ride without a ticket) – the cultural image of hare is arbitrary. Some French historical idioms (e.g. **"tirer les marrons du feu"** – pull chestnuts from the fire) reflect old children's tales. These are not transparent to English speakers.
- **Quantity and Measurement:** A small but telling universal is counting or measuring. English says "give an inch, take a mile"; Russian **"свободен на базе"** (free at the base) is slang, not parallel. Turkic languages use "six-on-one" to mean "nowhere"; English has "stick-in-the-mud." Both imply immobility but use different idioms.

These particulars demonstrate that translation often requires not just word substitution but cultural substitution. If no equivalent idiom exists, a translator or teacher might need to paraphrase (e.g. explaining "avoir le cafard" literally as "to have the cockroach" loses meaning, so one must gloss it as "to feel down"). Hajiyeva (2025) notes that preserving tone and cultural resonance may call for creative adaptation. In our view, building cross-cultural literacy is key: introducing learners to common idioms of the target culture (and their origins when interesting) fosters genuine understanding.

Pedagogical Implications

For ESL/EFL instruction, recognizing phraseological universals helps students form mental links. Teachers can present idioms by category (e.g. **Body Metaphors**, **Animal Imagery**, **Directional/Spatial Idioms**) and show cognate idioms in the learners' native languages when available. For instance, Azerbaijani and Turkish students often find English animal idioms relatable because of shared Turkic roots, but may struggle with Western agricultural idioms. English speakers learning French or Russian should be warned about false friends: a literal translation may mislead (e.g. **"to seek the olives in the sky"** is not an English idiom!). Instruction can leverage known cognitive metaphors: once students know "anger = heat," they can grasp many new idioms.

Curriculum development should incorporate **phraseological universals** (e.g. common metaphoric patterns across languages) as a teaching tool. Boers & Lindstromberg (2008) emphasize using *linguistic motivation* – systematic non-arbitrariness – in teaching vocabulary. For idioms, this means teaching the underlying metaphor (ex: **Time is money**, showing the general TIME-AS-CURRENCY concept) and then the specific idiom in context. Role-plays and visuals can reinforce the embodied basis (students can role-play "blowing off steam" to illustrate ANGER-AS-STEAM, etc.). At the same time, materials should highlight **cultural particularities**. For example, a lesson on feelings could include English "butterflies in the stomach," Turkish **"karnında kelebek uçuşuyor"** (exact counterpart meaning

butterflies in stomach), Russian **"бабочки в животе"** (identical), and French **"avoir la pétoche"** (colloquial, no literal image). Seeing overlaps and gaps prepares learners for pragmatic use.

Translation training benefits from contrastive phraseology awareness. Translators should be taught to analyze whether an idiom's *image* or *concept* is universal. If images differ (English "kick the bucket" vs. Spanish **"estirar la pata"** – both meaning die but one uses bucket, the other leg stretching), translators choose analogies. If only images differ (as with *boil with anger* vs. *blood is boiling*), they should find culturally natural phrasing. Resources like bilingual idiom dictionaries must be used critically; qualitative vetting by native speakers (as we did) is often necessary.

CONCLUSION

Our cross-cultural analysis underscores that idioms manifest both linguistic universals and culture-specific particulars. Most languages ground idioms in shared human experience (bodies, nature, emotion), leveraging common conceptual metaphors. Yet each language's unique history, folklore, and environment yield idiomatic nuances. For instance, Turkic and European languages alike use body-part metaphors, but differ in favored images (French often selects **"pieds"** (feet) or **"nez"** (nose) for certain emotions, whereas English uses **"gut"** or **"shoulder"**). Recognizing these patterns aids in ESL/EFL education: teachers can exploit universal imagery for easier comprehension while explicitly explaining culture-bound idioms to avoid misunderstandings.

For translators, awareness of idiom universals can suggest approximate equivalents, and awareness of particulars signals when literal renderings will fail. Our study suggests that idioms should be treated not as random hurdles, but as windows into cognition and culture. As language teaching moves toward intercultural competence, pedagogy must embed idiom learning in conceptual frameworks. **Future research** could focus on developing digital tools that align idioms across languages via underlying concepts (e.g. AI systems tagging idioms by metaphor theme), and on creating teaching materials that integrate cross-linguistic idiom sets. Such approaches can make phraseology a bridge rather than a barrier in multilingual communication.

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