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Language - specific and interlingual phraseological units.

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Abstract: Phraseological units (PUs) – fixed word combinations such as idioms, collocations, binomials, and phrasal verbs – are a central component of English vocabulary. They often convey meanings that cannot be deduced from their individual parts and carry cultural nuance. This paper examines English phraseological units and analyzes how they transfer (or fail to transfer) across languages, with a focus on Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Russian. Using a contrastive analytic approach, we compare selected English idioms and collocations with their literal translations, calques, or native equivalents in the target languages. Baker's (2011) typology of idiom translation strategies (e.g. finding an equivalent idiom, literal translation, or paraphrase) guides our analysis. We find that while some English expressions have close counterparts (e.g. *"break the ice"* → Turkish *buzları kırmak*), many are culture-bound or syntactically incongruent and require paraphrase or avoidance. English collocations (e.g. *strong tea*) often differ in adjective choice (Turkish *demli çay*, lit. "brewed tea"). Phrasal verbs pose particular challenges, as Turkic and Slavic languages typically lack direct analogues. These mismatches have clear implications for ESL learners and translators: instruction should emphasize semantic context and metaphor, not word-by-word rendering. We conclude by offering pedagogical recommendations for teaching English phraseology (e.g. using corpora and contrastive examples) and for translator training (e.g. raising awareness of non-equivalence and strategy use).

Keywords: *phraseological units; idioms; collocations; phrasal verbs; cross-linguistic transfer; ESL; translation.*

INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units (PUs) are multi-word expressions that function as single semantic or syntactic entities, often carrying meanings not directly inferable from their components. Examples include idioms (*"kick the bucket"*), collocations (*"make a decision"*), binomials (*"bread and butter"*), and phrasal verbs (*"give up"*). By some definitions, a PU is "a stable word combination with a fully or partially figurative meaning". In other words, idioms and fixed phrases encode metaphor or cultural nuance: *kick the bucket* means "to die" even though neither *kick* nor *bucket* suggest death. Such expressions permeate native English usage and are crucial for fluency. As one study observes, idiomatic expressions are "fundamental components of language" that "do not merely convey their literal meanings but often encapsulate deeper cultural significance". For English language learners (ESL) and translators, these units often pose difficulties because they cannot be translated word-for-word.

This paper explores English phraseological units that are (near-)unique or highly characteristic in English, and examines their cross-linguistic transfer into Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Russian. We investigate the strategies used to render English PUs in these languages – whether by finding a native

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idiom of similar meaning, calquing (literal translation of parts), using a neutral paraphrase, or other shifts. By contrasting English expressions with their potential equivalents in other languages, we aim to illuminate how linguistic and cultural differences affect translation and comprehension. We also consider pedagogical implications for ESL teaching and translator training. In so doing, we contribute a systematic contrastive analysis of phraseology involving understudied languages (Azeri, Turkish, Russian) alongside English.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The **Literature Review** surveys key research on phraseology, idiom translation, and L2 acquisition of multi-word units. In **Methodology** we outline our comparative approach. **Analysis and Discussion** presents selected English PUs and examines their cross-linguistic renditions, supported by examples and contrastive data. Finally, the **Conclusion** summarizes findings and offers practical recommendations for language teachers and translators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In linguistic research, phraseological units (PUs) have been studied extensively under terms like *phraseologisms*, *fixed expressions*, and *formulaic language*. There is broad consensus that PUs lie on a continuum of idiomaticity: some are fully opaque (idioms proper), others partially figurative, and some almost literal collocations. Veisbergs (2013) notes a "widely accepted definition" of a PU as "a stable word combination with a fully or partially figurative meaning". This includes classic idioms (e.g. *spill the beans*), collocations where word choices are fixed (e.g. *fast food*, *pay attention*), binomials (*bread and butter*), and phrasal verbs (verb + particle constructions common in Germanic languages). Gläser (1988) similarly defines a PU as a "lexicalized, reproducible word group". The key point is that PUs have meaning or function above the level of individual words.

Scholars of second language acquisition emphasize that PUs present challenges to learners. For instance, Nesselhauf (2003) found that collocations – combinations like *make a decision* or *heavy rain* – are "pervasive in language and difficult for language learners, even at an advanced level". Learners often underproduce idiomatic or collocational expressions that native speakers use freely. Howarth (1998) showed that knowledge of phraseology strongly correlates with overall language proficiency. Ellis (1996) and Durrant & Schmitt (2009) argue that formulaic sequences must be learned as holistic units rather than deduced from grammar. The *lexical approach* to language teaching (Lewis, 1997, 2000) similarly highlights teaching fixed phrases and collocations rather than isolated words. In sum, research suggests that mastery of PUs – collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs – is essential for L2 fluency, yet cross-linguistic differences can impede learners' acquisition.

Translation studies on phraseology have largely focused on idioms and fixed expressions. Mona Baker's seminal work identifies a range of strategies for translating idioms across languages. Baker (2011) lists strategies such as replacing an SL idiom with a TL idiom of similar meaning/form, using an idiom of similar meaning but different form, literal translation (calque), paraphrase, or omission. Rasul (2018) applies Baker's framework to multiple languages and notes, for example, that finding an exact idiomatic equivalent is "rarely possible" across unrelated languages. Instead, translators may use a TL idiom with similar meaning but different imagery (e.g. English *when pigs fly* rendered as Turkish *kırmızı kar yağınca* "when the snow turns red"). Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) famously call literal borrowing of expression elements a *calque*; they define it as "a special kind of borrowing whereby a language borrows an expression form of another, but then translates literally each of its elements". In

practice, however, calquing an English idiom word-for-word often fails to produce a meaningful TL expression, unless the imagery coincides. Chesterman (1997) and Chesterman & Wagner (2002) warn that literal translation of idioms usually yields nonsense or awkwardness. Accordingly, Baker notes that when a direct match is lacking, the translator's "most common" recourse is paraphrase – using plain language to convey the sense.

Studies have also examined phraseological differences cross-culturally. Cognitive semanticists like Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show that many idioms are based on conceptual metaphors (e.g. *time is money*, *life is a journey*), but these metaphors vary by culture. For instance, colorful English idioms like *"raining cats and dogs"* (pouring rain) have no literal counterpart in many languages; instead, others might say *"it's raining like fury"* or simply *"pouring"*. Sadigova (2024) compares English and Azerbaijani idioms, finding systematic semantic and cultural differences: an idiom's meaning often requires understanding its cultural background. In Slavic languages like Russian, idioms also abound but with different imagery (e.g. *сбить с толку* "to knock off course" for "to confuse"). Prior contrastive work (e.g. Gasimova 2022 on Azerbaijani, Shokurova 2019 on Uzbek) underscores that learners may transfer L1 idioms to English inappropriately or fail to recognize L2 idioms when no equivalent exists.

In summary, the literature indicates that (1) phraseological units are a core part of linguistic competence, (2) they are often culture-specific and non-compositional, and (3) translating them requires flexible strategies. For ESL pedagogy, this implies teaching attention to phraseology (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992) and contrasting L1/L2 usage. For translators, awareness of cross-linguistic mismatches and suitable rendering strategies is crucial.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive, contrastive approach. We selected a representative set of English phraseological units – including idioms, collocations, binomials, and phrasal verbs – commonly encountered in upper-intermediate to advanced English. Sources included English phraseology dictionaries and ESL idiom lists. For each, we identified any literal translations, calques, or native-language equivalents in Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Russian. Data came from bilingual dictionaries, language corpora, and consultation with native-speaker informants. We then categorized the transfer outcomes using a modified version of Baker's (2011) framework: (a) equivalent idiom in TL with similar metaphor, (b) equivalent meaning but different metaphorical imagery, (c) literal (calque) translation of form, and (d) paraphrase or periphrasis without figurative form. We also noted cases of *structural shifts* (e.g. passive-to-active, inversion of word order) and *non-equivalence* (no adequate native idiom).

The analysis emphasizes examples of each category. We also consider linguistic context: for instance, whether an idiom's register or use differs across languages. The intent is not to quantify frequency but to illustrate typical patterns of transfer and mismatch. The findings below draw on representative examples, summarized in a comparative table.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Defining English Phraseological Units

As defined in the literature, English phraseological units range from fully idiomatic (meaning cannot be composed from parts) to semi-idiomatic (collocations and set phrases). For example, *"spill the beans"*

means "reveal a secret," a meaning opaque from *spill* or *beans* alone. More transparent is *"make a decision,"* whose meaning is clear from its parts, but which is a preferred collocation in English (e.g. *do a decision* is incorrect). In pedagogical terms, native-like fluency requires knowledge of both idioms and typical collocations. Baker (2011) emphasizes that an idiom's *specific lexical items* can be significant; even small changes (*spill a bean* vs. *spill the beans*) may render a sequence non-idiomatic. We adopt the term "phraseological unit" broadly to cover all these fixed or semi-fixed expressions.

Idiomatic Equivalents and Calques

Many English idioms do have counterparts in Turkish and Slavic languages, often with different imagery. For example, **"break the ice"** (to initiate conversation) corresponds to Turkish *buzları kırmak* (literally "break the ices") and Russian *растопить лёд* (rastopit' led, "melt the ice"). Azerbaijani, by contrast, typically uses a non-ice metaphor: *gərginliyi azaltmaq* ("reduce the tension"). Thus, Turkish and Russian share the icy metaphor with English, but Azerbaijani uses a more literal rendering of meaning. Similarly, **"spill the beans"** (reveal a secret) translates as Azerbaijani *sirri açmaq* ("open the secret"), Turkish *ağzındaki baklayı çıkarmak* (lit. "take out the broad bean from one's mouth"), and Russian *выдать секрет* ("give out a secret"). Here, the Turkish expression preserves the bean imagery (though not commonly known in English) and literally means the same thing. The table below lists several such contrasts:

English PU	***Meaning***	***Azerbaijani Equivalent***	***Turkish Equivalent***	***Russian Equivalent***	***Comments***
break the ice	ease social tension	gərginliyi azaltmaq ("reduce tension")	buzları kırmak ("break the ices")	растопить лёд ("melt the ice")	English and Turk. use ice metaphor; Azeri uses tension metaphor.
spill the beans	reveal a secret	sirri açmaq ("open the secret")	ağzındaki baklayı çıkarmak ("remove bean from mouth")	выдать (чей-то) секрет ("give (one's) secret")	Turkic uses bean image; Russian uses generic "secret".
once in a blue moon	very rarely	ayda, ildə bir dəfə ("once a month, once a year")	kırk yılda bir ("once in forty years")	раз в сто лет ("once in a hundred years")	All use a time-interval metaphor; no "blue moon" reference.
strong tea	highly brewed tea	tünd çay ("dark tea" – Peace Corps manual)	demli çay ("brewed tea")	крепкий чай ("strong tea")	English "strong" ↔ Turkic "brewed/dark" (Azeri *tünd*).
kick the bucket	die	göz yummaq ("close one's eyes" – common euphemism)	mezara (boylamak) ("to level a grave")	сыграть в ящик ("play into a box"), откинуть коньки ("throw back the skates")	English uses "kick"; Turkic/Russian use passive or euphemistic idioms.
two sides of the same coin	two aspects of one situation	eyni paranın iki üzü / eyni xristinin iki gözü (lit. "two faces of the same coin"/"two eyes of same cross")	aynı paranın iki yüzü ("two faces of same coin")	две стороны одной медали ("two faces of one medal")	Semantically equivalent across languages, with minor lexical shifts.

These examples illustrate several points. First, **equivalence**: some English idioms have clear matches. *Two sides of the same coin* can often be translated nearly literally in Turkic and Russian. In Table 1, we see that Turkish and Azerbaijani both have *aynı paranın iki üzü* (Azeri) or *iki yüzü* (Turkish) meaning the same as English. Here the metaphor of a coin is shared; structure may invert (English "two sides *of* the coin" vs. Azerbaijani "the coin's two faces"), but equivalence is straightforward.

Second, **metaphorical shift**: often languages use different imagery for the same idea. For *"when pigs fly"* (meaning "never" or "something impossible"), English pig symbolism is peculiar. In Rasul's cross-language study, Turkish used *kırmızı kar yağınca* ("when red snow falls"), Persian *"when it is time of flowers"*, Kurdish *"when a month has no Saturday"*, and Arabic *"when roosters lay eggs"* – all different metaphors for impossibility. We likewise find that for *"break the ice,"* Azeri avoids the ice metaphor entirely. These shifts require translators to know a target-language idiom (Type 1.2 strategy).

Third, **literal calque vs. paraphrase**: Some English phrases have no idiomatic replacement. *"Under the weather"* (ill) is usually paraphrased: in Turkish, one says *kendimi iyi hissetmiyorum* ("I do not feel well"), literally a non-idiomatic sentence. If an English idiom has no conventional L2 counterpart, translators often paraphrase. Baker (2011) points out that when an idiom has no match, paraphrase (non-idiomatic rendering) is "by far the most common way" to translate it. For example, *"break a leg"* (good luck) has no literal Turkish or Russian equivalent; a translator would use a semantic paraphrase (e.g. Turkish *iyi şanslar*, "good luck"). Similarly, many English phrasal verbs (e.g. *"put up with"*, *"give up on"*, *"run into"*) have no single-word equivalents. They are rendered by simple verbs or verb+prep combinations in the TL, losing the idiomatic character (e.g. *tahammül etmek*, *pes etmek*, *rastlamak* respectively).

Finally, **structural shifts and grammaticalization**: Cross-linguistic differences in grammar sometimes force rephrasing. In Table 1, note *"strong tea"*: English uses *strong* ("heavily brewed"), but Turkish/Azeri use adjectives meaning "brewed" or "dark" (Azeri *tünd*). The English collocation is lexicalized, but other languages lexicalize with a different adjective. This is a collocational mismatch: a learner who said *güclü çay* (using "powerful") would sound odd. Research on collocations indicates that such L1-based collocational errors are common (cf. Nesselhauf 2003). In teaching, pointing out that Turkic languages say *demli çay* instead of "strong tea" can help students avoid L1 transfer errors.

Implications for ESL Learners and Translators

The above contrasts have clear implications. For **ESL learners**, phraseological units must be learned as units, not via literal translation. Learners whose native languages lack a particular expression risk misunderstanding idioms or collocations. For instance, an Azerbaijani learner might interpret *"kick the bucket"* as a physical image rather than *"die"*. In teaching, it is important to emphasize meaning and use contextualized examples. Lewis (2000) and others argue for the "lexical chunk" approach: teaching common fixed expressions and collocational patterns in context. Role-play, stories, or visuals can illustrate idiomatic meanings (e.g. showing an old phrase origin). Contrastive explanation (e.g. "English says *break the ice*, but in Turkish we say *buzları kırmak*") can also raise awareness. Corpus-based activities (concordance lines of idioms in real text) help learners see usage. Critically, instructors should warn against word-by-word translation and encourage learners to infer from context or ask for meaning of unknown idioms.

For **translators**, understanding the types of phraseological mismatch is crucial. Baker's strategy taxonomy is a practical guide: always first seek an existing TL idiom of equivalent meaning; if none, consider a calque only if it yields intelligible imagery (rare), or else paraphrase. Our analysis confirms Baker's finding that *literal match is "achieved only occasionally"*. Thus, translator training should include ample practice with idioms and collocations, discussion of non-equivalence, and use of resources like idiom dictionaries. Translators working between English and the languages studied must also be sensitive to register – some idioms are colloquial and may be inappropriate in formal translation.

CONCLUSION

English is rich in phraseological units that are often language- or culture-specific. Our contrastive analysis shows that while some English idioms and collocations can be mirrored in Azerbaijani, Turkish, or Russian, many require reinterpretation or neutralization. Translators and learners must navigate literal vs. figurative meanings, differing metaphors, and grammar. For example, idioms with animal or weather imagery in English may have no match abroad (requiring paraphrase), whereas some concepts (two sides of a coin) align easily across languages. Collocations frequently show minor mismatches (e.g. *strong tea* vs. *demli çay*), suggesting that vocabulary instruction should highlight such differences.

In practice, language teachers should integrate phraseology instruction explicitly. Activities might include contrastive phrase lists, idiom matching exercises, and corpus search tasks to build awareness. Translators should be trained in Baker's strategies and given comparative phraseological references for relevant language pairs. Future research could expand the comparative table by corpus mining (e.g. extracting bilingual idioms from parallel texts) and examine learner errors with phraseology in detail. Overall, recognising and addressing the uniqueness of English phraseological patterns is essential for effective ESL teaching and for achieving natural-sounding translations.

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