

<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.024061>

A Comparative Analysis of Idiomatic Expressions in English and Azerbaijani: Cultural and Linguistic Insights

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4808-5982>

Sarjan Sadigova

Nakhchivan State University

| Keywords | Abstract |
|---|--|
| Comparative Phraseology Idiomatic Expressions English and Azerbaijani Linguistics Cross-Linguistic Analysis Cultural Semantics | This study examines idiomatic expressions in English and Azerbaijani, focusing on their semantic, structural, and cultural features through a comparative lens. Idioms, as fixed phrases with figurative meanings, offer valuable insights into the cultural and linguistic landscapes of their respective languages. Drawing on examples from English and Azerbaijani, the study identifies similarities and differences in idiomatic structures, grammatical organization, and cultural connotations. The findings reveal that while idioms in both languages share universal characteristics, such as anthropocentrism and the use of metaphor, they also display unique structural and cultural traits shaped by their linguistic systems. The research highlights the importance of idioms in intercultural communication and their role in understanding the worldview of language speakers. By exploring the equivalence and variability of idioms across languages, the study contributes to the broader field of comparative phraseology and cross-linguistic analysis. |

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions serve as a widespread means of communication, manifesting themselves across various languages and cultures. From the inception of human speech, idioms have formed an integral part of language, emerging from human communication and interaction. In modern times, English stands out as a widely used medium of communication among peoples worldwide. Understanding the development and function of idioms in English can help address the challenges that arise during intercultural communication. This understanding may also lead to the development of effective mechanisms for overcoming these difficulties.

Scholars regard the diverse nature and richness of idioms in speech as a key indicator of their importance, making idioms a subject of study across various interrelated disciplines (Tagiev, 1966, p. 5). As Wilhelm von Humboldt noted:

“It will be possible to distinguish languages unknown to us to this day, clarify their character, extract the source of this character in their structure, and evaluate their historical significance, thereby studying the diversity and kinship in historical destinies” (Humboldt, 1985, pp. 376–377).

Idiomatic expressions are fundamental components of language. These stable yet versatile combinations of words do not merely convey their literal meanings but often encapsulate deeper cultural significance. To fully grasp their meaning, one must consider both the linguistic context and the cultural connotations associated with them.



This is an open access article under the
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
International License

Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN 3030-1718

Actuality of the Topic

English, as the most widely used language for international communication, offers a valuable lens through which to study idioms. Exploring the mechanisms behind the development of idiomatic expressions in English can help identify common challenges in communication between speakers of different native languages. Such exploration also aids in devising strategies to overcome these challenges.

A comprehensive understanding of idioms is one of the cornerstones of fluency in a national language. Idioms provide a unique window into the complex, colorful, and often enigmatic cultural landscapes of their speakers. Their development often mirrors the expansion of colloquial lexicons and plays a pivotal role in intercultural communication. As idioms reflect the soul and thought processes of a people, studying them allows not only a deeper understanding of the language but also insights into the character and worldview of its speakers. Examining idioms across linguistically diverse systems reveals both similarities and differences in their components, offering valuable comparative insights.

The Object and Subject of the Study

The object of this research is the systematic generalization of issues arising from the comparative study of idioms in the English language. The subject of this study is the comparative analysis of idiomatic expressions.

Aims and Tasks of the Research

The research aims to:

1. Uncover the essence of idioms and shed light on their less-understood aspects.
2. Determine their relationship with people's thought processes and lifestyles.
3. Explore their reflection in different languages.
4. Analyze the linguistic landscape of idioms across various languages.

Research Method

This study employs a combination of descriptive, data collection, comparative-historical, and comparative-contrast methods. It also draws on dictionaries containing idioms in the English language.

Scientific Novelty of the Research

The scientific novelty of this research lies in the comparative study of idioms across linguistically distinct systems, such as Azerbaijani and Russian. The study provides semantic, structural, and structural-semantic interpretations of idioms, contributing to a deeper understanding of their unique features.

Main Features of Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions, also known as phraseological units, share commonalities across languages in terms of meaning, stylistic nuances, imagery, component compatibility, and structural-grammatical organization (Mesineva, 1964, p. 47). S. Jafarov defines idioms as “stable word combinations that convey a figurative meaning of words with real meaning” (Jafarov, 1970, p. 97). Comparative studies show that numerous idioms in Russian have direct equivalents in German, such as *протянуть руку*—*die Hand reichen* (to extend a hand), and *открыть рот*—*den Mund auf tun* (to open one's mouth) (Mesineva, 1964, p. 249).



According to Mesineva's research, Russian and German idioms exhibit significant diversity in verb phraseological combinations. In Russian, verbs such as *брат*, *делать*, *дать*, and *оказывать* frequently contribute to idiomatic constructions. In German, equivalent verbs like *nehmen*, *machen*, *geben*, *leihen*, *anziehen*, and *erweisen* function similarly, as do *prendre*, *faire*, and *donner* in French. English relies heavily on verbs such as *to have*, *to give*, *to take*, *to get*, *to make*, *to put*, *to go*, and *to keep*. Examples of English idioms featuring these verbs include:

- *Give somebody a dressing down (to reprimand someone).*
- *Take heart of grace (to regain courage).*
- *Get the upper hand of (to gain an advantage).*
- *Make cow/sheep's eyes at (to look at someone lovingly).*
- *Put somebody through his facings (to examine or test someone).*
- *Go to the dogs (to decline or deteriorate).*
- *Come into handy (to prove useful).*
- *Give a helping hand (to assist someone).*

Semantic Relationships in Idioms

The assertion that idiomatic expressions emerge from a loss of semantic and formal connection between language units contrasts with the principle that component integrity is fundamental to creating idiomatic meaning. The components of idioms maintain their original form and function but take on new semantic roles within the idiom. For instance, the English idioms *Achilles' heel (a weakness)*, *in the seventh heaven (extremely happy)*, and *Draconian laws (extremely harsh rules)* reflect cultural and historical connotations. Similarly, Azerbaijani idioms like *qarğa mändə qoz var (a sarcastic remark about misplaced trust)* and *ilanı Seyid Əhməd əli ilə tutmaq (to accomplish something dangerous through cunning)* carry unique cultural significance.

The meaning of idioms transcends the individual meanings of their components. For example, the Azerbaijani idiom *bir oğlandır ki, çayda balıq yan gedər* describes an exceptionally talented boy, with no direct connection between the boy and the literal components of *river* or *fish*. Similarly, the English idiom *you can't collect wood on a string* implies *a lack of trust*, which cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of *wood* or *string*.

Structural and Semantic Stability

Idiomatic expressions often derive their meaning from collective usage rather than individual components, creating figurative and culturally embedded meanings. Adilov (1992) notes that "the meaning of the individual elements of an idiomatic expression and the meaning of the whole expression are never related to the modern era. Words in an idiomatic expression express a common meaning only together and lose their previous lexical-semantic properties" (p. 8). For instance, the idiom *lose one's head* means *to lose composure*, while *close one's eyes to something* implies *ignoring a problem*. These phrases illustrate how idioms rely on context and cultural familiarity for interpretation.

Semantic-Grammatical Groups of Idioms



In English idioms, the semantic relationships between components often align with the overall meaning of the expression. For instance, the idiom *the jungle law* (meaning “illegality” or “arbitrariness”) derives its literal meaning from the phrase *the law of the jungle*. Here, the term *law*, as the second component, conveys the broader meaning of the idiom, while *jungle* evokes chaos, disorder, and unpredictable dangers. This interplay between components demonstrates how idiomatic meaning can emerge from their combination.

The classification of idioms often prioritizes the meanings they convey rather than the individual meanings of their components. Chernov (as cited in Guliyev, 2016, p. 139) proposed four main semantic-grammatical groups for idioms in the Chuvash language:

1. Substantive idioms
2. Adjective idioms
3. Adverbial idioms
4. Verb-idiomatic combinations (Чернов, 1985, p. 99).

This framework, as noted by Chernov, can be effectively applied to the study of idiomatic expressions in both English and Azerbaijani. Through comparative analysis, these groups reveal thematic and structural similarities and differences between the two languages. Thematic grouping also helps identify semantic relationships between idiomatic components and the cultural origins of idioms.

M.A. Reichstein highlights the anthropocentric nature of idioms, emphasizing their connection to human experience (Raikhshtein, 1980, p. 32). The semantics of idiomatic components often reflect human traits, categorizing idioms into systemized groups. Idioms related to human behavior, particularly negative traits such as betrayal, tyranny, boastfulness, rudeness, gossip, and hypocrisy, are prevalent in both English and Azerbaijani. These idioms reveal the influence of linguistic and extralinguistic factors on language.

Examples of Idioms Expressing Negative Human Traits

- **English:** *Paint somebody black, crowd the mourners, a bad actor, sell a person, fiddle while Rome is burning, swear black is white, shoot the sitting pheasant, hit a man when down.*
- **Azerbaijani:** *Qoyun dərisinə girmiş canavar* (a wolf in sheep's clothing), *çörəyi dizinin üstədir* (untrustworthy), *saman altdan su yeridən* (a cunning person), *özgəsinə quyu qazan* (to dig a pit for others), *dava dağarcığı* (a troublemaker), *başı pambıq ilə kəsmək* (to manipulate cunningly), *Mazandaran çaqqalı* (a sly person).

Idioms in both languages often exhibit overlapping meanings, though some differ significantly. Semantic similarity can sometimes transcend grammatical groupings, complicating the process of systematic identification. For example, while the English *Phraseological Dictionary* (Kunin, 1984, p. 942) contains over 20,000 idiomatic combinations, Azerbaijani lacks a comparable comprehensive resource, posing challenges for researchers.

Structural Components and Semantic Formation

The specific meanings of idioms often rely heavily on their structural components, which shape and define their semantics. These components function cohesively, forming a new meaning beyond their individual definitions. For example, some idiomatic combinations derive their overall semantics from the slightly altered or weakened meanings of their individual components.



Understanding the role of these structural elements is critical in decoding idioms, as it allows for a deeper exploration of their linguistic and cultural significance. Through such analysis, the intricate interplay between language systems and idiomatic meaning becomes more evident.

Means of Expression of Idioms in English and Azerbaijani

In both English and Azerbaijani, idioms are often formed around nouns, with the noun serving as the structural and grammatical center of the expression. Nominal idiomatic units in these languages follow specific structural models, as outlined below:

Structural Models of Nominal Idiomatic Units

1. Adjective + Noun

These idioms, often referred to as "fixed epithets," derive their meaning from the entire expression rather than solely from one component.

- **English:** *clear head, cool head, wise head, hot head, a long face, pudding face, pretty face, hidden hand, fishy eyes.*
- **Azerbaijani:** *ayrı baxış (crooked glance), qızıl qan (golden blood), qızıl əl (golden hand), yüngül əxlaq (light morality), yumşaq ürək (soft heart), dumanlı beyin (foggy mind), ala göz (multicolored eye), boş baş (empty head).*

2. Noun + Noun

Idioms constructed with two nouns often emphasize a direct or relational meaning.

- **English:** *face to face, shoulder by shoulder.*
- **Azerbaijani:** *üz-üzə (face to face), çiyin-çiyinə (shoulder to shoulder).*

3. Noun + Adverb

Sometimes referred to as "adverbial idioms," these structures combine nouns with adverbs to convey figurative meanings.

- **English:** *never batted an eyelash, hands down, up to the eyes (in debt), over heads and ears, out of one's hair.*
- **Azerbaijani:** *üzü irəli (face forward), keyfi yuxarı (spirits high), başı aşağı (head down), əli aşağı (hands low).*

4. Idioms with Numbers

Idiomatic expressions involving numbers are prevalent in both languages, conveying symbolic or cultural significance.

- **English:** *have two left hands, first hand, two heads are better than one, four eyes see more than two, bear two faces under one hood.*
- **Azerbaijani:** *birdə alacağı yox (no remaining debt), beşdə verəcəyi (five left to give), yeddi arxa dönəni (seven generations back), bir deyənin olunca, min yeyənin olsun (have one critic, but a thousand admirers), qırx quldur (forty thieves).*

Verb Idioms



Verb idioms are more numerous than nominal idioms in both English and Azerbaijani. They play a critical role in conveying figurative, emotional, and concise ideas. Words that may lack expressiveness in their usual form take on vivid meanings within idiomatic expressions, thereby becoming effective communicative tools.

Typological Comparison of Idioms in English and Azerbaijani

A typological comparison of English and Azerbaijani idioms highlights notable differences in grammatical organization and structural formation.

Predicative Word Combinations

In both languages, many idioms include predicative word combinations. However, these combinations appear as verb clauses in Azerbaijani and as subordinate clauses in English.

- **Examples:**

- *Don't count the chickens before they are hatched* → *Cücəni payızda sayarlar* (Count the chicks in autumn).
- *To take the hair of the dog that bites you* → *İti öldürənə sürütləyərlər* (They will drag the dog's killer).
- *To bite the hand that feeds you* → *Çörək verən əli kəsmək* (Cut the hand that feeds you).

Position of Verb Components

In English, the verb component typically precedes the idiomatic combination (except in negations), whereas in Azerbaijani, it often follows.

- **English:** *To pay through the nose* (to pay a lot of money).
- **Azerbaijani:** *Başə düşmək* (to understand), *Qulaqardına vurmaq* (to ignore).

However, in Azerbaijani poetic language, this rule can be violated: *Könül, səccadəyə basma ayaq, təsbiha əl vurma* (O soul, do not tread on the prayer mat, do not touch the rosary).

Use of Verb Components Without Direct Complements

In Azerbaijani, verb components in idioms can appear with nouns in the idiom without requiring a direct complement. This is not possible in free word combinations.

- **Azerbaijani:** *Gün ağlamaq* (to prepare for the future).

In English, verbs in idioms are used similarly to their free combination counterparts, without requiring a preposition.

- **English:** *To speak daggers* (to speak angrily), *to speak English, French, or many languages*.

Use of Articles in English Idioms

Unlike Azerbaijani, English idioms often include articles, which contribute to their specific meaning.

- **Examples:**

- *To seize the bull by the horns*.



- *To be a cool cat.*
- *To let the cat out of the bag.*
- *To nail one's collars to the mast.*

Equivalence of Idioms in Languages with Different Systems

The issue of equivalence in idioms across languages with different systems has long been debated. One critical aspect of this debate involves whether phraseologisms can be effectively replaced with a single word during translation. Some scholars argue that the meaning of an entire idiomatic combination cannot be encapsulated in a single word. This perspective holds merit, as the existence of multi-word expressions highlights the nuanced capacity of language to convey ideas that cannot be simplified into single terms.

Language, as a complex system, offers various means to express ideas, and each linguistic unit has its unique place and purpose. The diversity of idiomatic expressions reflects the richness and flexibility of a language. S. Aliyeva supports this view, noting that “considering a phraseologism equivalent to a word does not mean identifying the word with a phraseologism. Rather, it is possible to use a phraseologism as a synonym for a word.” This phenomenon is evident in both Azerbaijani and English.

Examples of Idiom-to-Word Equivalence

- **Azerbaijani:** *əldən düşmək* (to tire out).
- **English:** *to get on one's nerves* (to annoy or irritate).

From this perspective, phraseology and single words can serve as functional equivalents, yet they remain distinct in linguistic structure and purpose. The existence of this difference underscores the unique role idioms play as a specialized linguistic category.

Structural, Semantic, and Structural-Semantic Similarities and Differences

The equivalence or divergence of idioms in languages with different systems is influenced by structural, semantic, and structural-semantic factors. Similarities in idiomatic expressions often arise from universal imagery shared across cultures.

For example:

- **Azerbaijani:** *gözə girmək* (to attract attention).
- **English:** *drag by ears*.
- **Russian:** *кидаться (метаться) в глаза*.

In this instance, synonymous verb components (*drag* and *girmək*) allow for equivalence. This phenomenon extends to other idioms:

- **English:** *lay (put) a finger*.
- **Azerbaijani:** *əlini batırmaq* (to dirty one's hand).
- **Russian:** *пачкать (марать) руки* (to soil one's hands).

Partial, Complete, and Non-Equivalence



Research shows that idioms may exhibit partial, complete, or no equivalence across languages. Structural-semantic equivalence often depends on the overlap of connotative meanings. Primary meaning equivalence plays a vital role in this process.

Examples of Equivalence

- **Azerbaijani:** *əlindən sürüşüb çıxmaq* (to slip through one's fingers).
- **English:** *to slip through one's fingers*.
- **Russian:** *поскользнуться между пальцев*.
- **Azerbaijani:** *üz-üzə gəlmək* (to meet face-to-face).
- **English:** *face-to-face*.
- **Russian:** *лицом к лицу*.

Idioms with Partial Equivalence or Unique Contexts

Some idioms offer only partial equivalence or may lack counterparts entirely. For example:

- **English:** *to draw the wool over someone's eyes* (to deceive someone).
- **Russian:** *водить кого-либо за нос* (to lead someone by the nose).
- **Azerbaijani:** *başını piyləmək* or *başını aldatmaq* (to manipulate or deceive someone).

Occasionally, the meaning of an idiom in Azerbaijani may align with multiple idiomatic expressions in English or Russian. For instance:

- **Azerbaijani:** *çaya susuz aparıb, susuz gətirmək* (to deceive skillfully).

Conclusion

The grammatical models and lexical content of language systems follow specific regularities, which form the basis for idiomatic expressions. Idioms, as unique linguistic units, exist within the idiomatic corpus of a language and are distinct from paradigmatic features. Despite their uniqueness, idiomatic combinations share common features that define their role as a subsystem within the larger linguistic system. These idiomatic units reflect the foundational characteristics of the language and its cultural attributes.

Based on the comparative analysis of English and Azerbaijani idiomatic systems, the following key conclusions have been drawn:

1. **Unity of Meaning:** The meaning of individual elements within an idiomatic expression often does not align with the meaning of the whole expression. Consequently, idioms should be studied as holistic units to fully comprehend their intended meaning.
2. **Flexibility in Form:** In languages with differing grammatical systems, the same idiom may exist in both short and long forms, reflecting structural variations.
3. **Nominal Idiomatic Structures:** In both Azerbaijani and English, idiomatic expressions frequently adhere to specific structural models, such as:

- *Adjective + Noun*



This is an open access article under the
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
International License

Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN 3030-1718

- *Noun + Noun*
 - *Noun + Adverb*
 - Idioms involving numbers
4. **Mixed Lexical and Grammatical Structures:** Both languages allow for idiomatic expressions that combine lexical and grammatical components, showcasing unique blends of internal structures.
 5. **Verb Phraseologisms:** Verb phraseological combinations are prevalent in both English and Azerbaijani. However, these combinations differ structurally:
 - In Azerbaijani, predicative word combinations appear as verb clauses.
 - In English, they often appear as subordinate clauses.
 6. **Use of Verb Components:** In Azerbaijani, the verb component within idioms frequently takes an indirect complement, often derived from the nominal part of the idiom. In contrast, in English, verb components are used with indirect complements in both idioms and free word combinations.

This comparative study underscores the unique yet universal characteristics of idiomatic expressions, offering insights into their linguistic and cultural significance. These findings highlight the importance of idiomatic expressions as a bridge between linguistic systems and as a reflection of cultural identity.

References

- Abel, B. (2003). English idioms in the first language and second language lexicon: A dual representation approach. *Second language research*, 19(4), 329-358.
- Adilov, M. I., & Yusifov, G. (1992). *Sabit söz birləşmələri*. Bakı: Maarif.
- Bayramova, T. (2023). *A Comparative Investigation Of Conceptual Metaphors In Azerbaijani Vs English Political Discourse: American And Azerbaijani Presidential Speeches* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Bekeyeva, N., Bissengali, A., Mankeyeva, Z., & Nurdauletova, B. (2021). Phraseological Expressions in the Turkic Language: Comparative Analysis. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 9(2 (Themed Issue on Modern Realities of National Languages of CIS Countries)), 29-40.
- Cəfərov, S. (1970). *Müasir Azərbaycan dili. Leksika*. Bakı: Maarif.
- Chernov, M. F. (1985). *Фразеология современного чувашского языка*. Чебоксары: Чувашское книжное издательство.
- Əliyeva, S. (1999). İngilis və Azərbaycan dillərində frazeoloji birləşmələrin leksik-semantik xüsusiyyətləri. *Tədqiqatlar. AMEA Nəsimi ad. Dilçilik İnstitutu*, 1, 100–104.
- Grabowski, Ł., & Pezik, P. (2023). Marking and breaking phraseology in English and Polish: a comparative corpus-informed study. *Poznan Studies in Contemporary Linguistics*, 59(3), 551-575.
- Hasanova, S. (2023). *Aesthetic Issues in Translation of Azerbaijani Poetry into English* (Doctoral dissertation).



- Liu, D. (2003). The most frequently used spoken American English idioms: A corpus analysis and its implications. *Tesol Quarterly*, 37(4), 671-700.
- Mammadli, M. (2024). *Analysis of the impact of L1 transfer and context on comprehension of metaphorical expressions in a foreign language: a study of Azerbaijani learners of English* (Master's thesis, Middle East Technical University).
- Mammadova, F. N. (2024). *Borrowing as a word formation process in the globalization era: the case of English to Azerbaijani* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Mäntylä, K. (2004). *Idioms and language users: the effect of the characteristics of idioms on their recognition and interpretation by native and non-native speakers of English* (No. 13). Jyväskylän yliopisto.
- Mesineva, L. A. (1964). Глагольные выражения в русском языке в сопоставлении с глагольными выражениями в немецком языке. *Вопросы фразеологии*, 247.
- Namazova, S. (2023). *A Cognitive-Linguistic Analysis of Advanced Azerbaijani Learners' Written Output* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Nikulina, E. (2015). English phraseology: integration with terminology science. *Journal of language and education*, 1(2), 41-45.
- Quliyev, T. (2016). *Müxtəlif sistemli dillərdə idiomatik birləşmələr*. Bakı: Mütərcim.
- Satvoldieva, U. D. (2020). A typological analysis of body parts names in English as part of somatic phraseology. *Проблемы современной науки и образования*, (2 (147)), 32-34.
- Tagiyev, M. T. (1966). *Глагольная фразеология современного русского языка (опыт изучения фразеологических единиц по окружению)*. Баку: Маариф.
- Tursunov, M. M. (2022). Analysis of some english idioms containing popular proper names. *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Research and Development*, 5, 62-67.
- Каримова, З. (2021). Linguoculturological properties of the use of phraseological units in teaching english. *Общество и инновации*, 2(2/S), 306-309.

