



CROSS-CULTURAL FUNCTIONS OF ENGLISH IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract: This article investigates the cross-cultural functions of English idiomatic expressions within intercultural communication. The study analyzes the semantic, stylistic, pragmatic, and cultural characteristics of idioms and examines their role in expressing national mentality, emotional evaluation, and communicative norms. Special attention is given to the difficulties of interpreting and translating idiomatic expressions across cultures. The research also explores how idioms influence communicative competence, discourse effectiveness, and intercultural understanding in modern English communication through various contextual and stylistic examples.

Keywords: idiomatic expressions, intercultural communication, phraseology, semantic analysis.

Idiomatic expressions represent one of the most culturally marked layers of language because they preserve historical experience, collective mentality, traditions, and social norms of a particular linguistic community. In intercultural communication, English idioms perform not only semantic and stylistic functions but also pragmatic, cognitive, and sociocultural roles. Their interpretation depends heavily on cultural background knowledge, contextual awareness, and communicative competence. As a result, the study of cross-cultural functions of English idiomatic expressions occupies an important place in modern linguistics, phraseology, pragmatics, and discourse analysis.

According to Edward Sapir, language cannot exist independently from culture because vocabulary and phraseological units reflect the social reality and worldview of a speech community. This idea was further developed by Benjamin Lee Whorf, who argued that linguistic structures influence human perception and conceptualization of reality. Idiomatic expressions clearly demonstrate this relationship because their figurative meanings are usually formed through culturally specific metaphors and symbolic associations. For example, the English idiom “break the ice” means to initiate communication in



a tense or unfamiliar social situation. Semantically, the expression originates from the physical act of breaking frozen ice to create movement or connection. In intercultural communication, this idiom functions pragmatically to reduce social distance and establish friendly interaction. However, literal translation into other languages may create misunderstanding if equivalent metaphorical structures do not exist. In Uzbek communication, similar meanings are often expressed descriptively rather than idiomatically. Therefore, translators and language learners must understand both the semantic and cultural dimensions of the expression.

Another important example is the idiom “spill the beans,” meaning to reveal a secret unintentionally. The expression is historically associated with ancient voting practices in Greece, where beans were used in elections. Although modern speakers rarely know the historical origin, the idiom continues to function effectively in informal English discourse. From a stylistic perspective, the phrase introduces conversational informality and emotional expressiveness. In intercultural contexts, non-native speakers may interpret the expression literally because the lexical meanings of “spill” and “beans” do not directly indicate secrecy or disclosure. This demonstrates that idioms often require background cultural competence rather than purely linguistic knowledge.

Researchers in cognitive linguistics emphasize that idiomatic expressions are largely based on conceptual metaphors. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphorical thinking shapes human conceptual systems and everyday communication. Many English idioms related to emotions, success, failure, or social relationships are grounded in universal bodily experiences but culturally interpreted in different ways. For instance, the idiom “to see red” means to become angry. The association between the color red and anger exists in many cultures, making the expression relatively understandable across linguistic communities. Nevertheless, stylistic intensity may differ culturally. In English discourse, the idiom often appears in conversational and literary contexts to intensify emotional expression. Example:

“When he heard the accusation, he saw red immediately.”

Here the idiom performs an expressive stylistic function by strengthening emotional imagery. In Uzbek, anger may instead be associated with “jahl otiga minmoq” or similar culturally adapted metaphors. Thus, even when emotional concepts are universal, phraseological representation remains culturally conditioned.

Cross-cultural pragmatics also demonstrates that idioms reflect politeness strategies and communicative conventions. According to Geoffrey Leech, pragmatic meaning depends on social context and interpersonal relations .



English speakers frequently use idiomatic expressions to soften criticism, create humor, or establish solidarity. For example, the idiom “it’s not my cup of tea” indirectly expresses dislike or lack of preference without sounding excessively negative. Instead of direct rejection, the speaker uses metaphorical politeness. In intercultural interaction, speakers from more direct communicative cultures may fail to recognize the mitigated pragmatic meaning and interpret the statement literally. The idiom “a piece of cake” provides another important example of semantic simplification through metaphor. The expression means that something is very easy to accomplish. Semantically, pleasant and effortless eating experiences are mapped onto successful task completion. In intercultural discourse, this idiom functions to encourage confidence and reduce communicative tension. Example:

“The exam was a piece of cake for experienced students”.

Stylistically, the idiom creates informality and conversational naturalness. However, literal translation may confuse learners unfamiliar with metaphorical transfer mechanisms. Phraseological equivalence therefore becomes one of the central problems in translation studies.

Translation scholars emphasize that idioms are among the most difficult linguistic units to transfer between languages because equivalent semantic, stylistic, and cultural meanings rarely coincide completely. Mona Baker notes that translators often encounter challenges related to culture-specific metaphors, pragmatic implications, and stylistic coloring. For example, the English idiom “kick the bucket” meaning “to die” possesses strong colloquial and humorous connotations. Literal translation into another language may produce absurd or inappropriate interpretations. Translators therefore often replace the idiom with culturally acceptable equivalents rather than preserving lexical structure.

The stylistic function of idiomatic expressions is particularly visible in literary discourse. Writers use idioms to create realistic dialogue, reveal character identity, and reflect social background. William Shakespeare significantly influenced English phraseology through expressions that later became idiomatic units in everyday speech. Idioms such as “green-eyed monster”, “break the ice”, and “heart of gold” originated or became popular through literary usage. Their continued presence in modern English demonstrates how literature contributes to cultural memory and phraseological development. In media discourse, idiomatic expressions frequently function persuasively and emotionally. Journalists and advertisers use idioms to attract audience attention and create memorable messages. For example, headlines such as “The company is back on track” or “The government faces an uphill battle” employ idiomatic metaphors to simplify complex information. In intercultural communication, however, such expressions may create



comprehension barriers for non-native readers. Consequently, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction increasingly emphasizes idiomatic competence alongside grammatical accuracy.

Another important cross-cultural function of idioms involves identity construction. Phraseological choices often indicate membership in a particular cultural or social group. Native speakers naturally integrate idioms into spontaneous speech, while non-native speakers may avoid them because of uncertainty regarding usage and appropriateness. According to Dell Hymes, communicative competence includes not only grammatical knowledge but also sociocultural appropriateness. Therefore, successful intercultural communication requires understanding when, where, and with whom idiomatic expressions can be used effectively. For example, business communication generally avoids highly culture-specific idioms because international participants may misunderstand figurative meanings. Expressions such as “think outside the box” or “get the ball rolling” are common in English-speaking corporate environments, yet they may confuse international professionals unfamiliar with metaphorical business jargon. In academic discourse, excessive idiomaticity may reduce clarity and formality. Thus, the communicative function of idioms depends strongly on discourse type and situational context.

Digital communication and globalization have also transformed the usage of English idiomatic expressions. Through films, television series, music, and social media, English idioms spread rapidly across cultures and become partially internationalized. Younger generations of non-native speakers increasingly recognize expressions such as “hit the road”, “under pressure”, or “once in a blue moon” through media exposure. Nevertheless, passive recognition does not always guarantee productive or contextually appropriate usage. This demonstrates the ongoing importance of intercultural linguistic education.

Modern linguistics therefore considers idiomatic competence an essential component of intercultural communicative competence. Understanding idioms involves semantic interpretation, pragmatic awareness, stylistic sensitivity, and cultural knowledge simultaneously. English idiomatic expressions function not merely as decorative linguistic elements but as carriers of national mentality, emotional evaluation, social interaction patterns, and historical experience. Their successful interpretation significantly improves communication effectiveness and minimizes intercultural misunderstanding.

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