



THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGICAL VARIATION

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ABSTRACT

Phraseological units such as idioms, proverbs, and collocations are not merely fixed strings of words; they encapsulate the cultural values, histories, and social contexts of their speakers. This article examines how cultural factors shape variation in English phraseology. Drawing on linguistic and cultural studies, it highlights that idioms carry meanings beyond their literal components and often derive from historical, occupational, or folkloric contexts that reflect a community's way of life. The literature review surveys evidence that idioms function as cultural artifacts that encode shared human experiences and socially specific knowledge. In the main analysis, English phraseological variation is explored through examples of regional and historical differences (e.g. British vs. American idioms, and idioms from medieval, nautical, or rural life), metaphorical themes (e.g. body parts, animals), and modern media influences. The discussion emphasizes that understanding these cultural underpinnings is crucial for language teaching, translation, and intercultural communication. The conclusion underscores that English phraseology continuously evolves with social change, and that attentive study of idioms yields insight into both universal human cognition and the unique culture-bound perspectives of English-speaking communities.

Introduction

Phraseological units – including idioms, proverbs, and other fixed expressions – are a crucial component of any language. In English, these expressions “carry meanings that cannot be understood by analyzing individual words alone; they are embedded with cultural references, historical contexts, and social connotations”. In other words, idioms and proverbs are often opaque to non-native speakers precisely because they encode cultural knowledge. For example, the idiom kick the bucket (meaning “to die”) and the proverb a stitch in time saves nine both reflect folkloric or historical practices that are not obvious from the words themselves. Linguists note that language functions as a “mirror of the surrounding world”; phraseology in particular provides a gallery of culturally rich expressions (as seen, for instance, in the English language’s numerous animal metaphors and historical allusions).

Because phraseological units are tightly interwoven with culture, examining their variation sheds light on how English speakers from different regions and epochs conceptualize experiences and values. The objective of this paper is to analyze the role of culture in shaping English phraseological variation. By reviewing relevant literature and examining representative cases, we show that idioms reflect both universal cognitive patterns (e.g. common metaphors) and culture-specific references (e.g. historical or environmental allusions). Understanding these influences is essential for second-language learning and intercultural communication: learners must recognize that many English idioms stem from particular cultural stories or norms. The following sections review existing research on idioms and culture, present an analysis of how cultural factors produce variation in English phraseology, and discuss the implications for language education and translation.

Literature Review

Research in linguistics and cultural studies has long emphasized the interplay between phraseology and culture. Muminova (2024) argues that English phraseological units are not arbitrary; they “offer insight into both linguistic structures and cultural norms”. Indeed, phrases like *spill the beans* or *break the ice* make sense only against a backdrop of social practices (like sharing secrets or easing tension in conversation). In her survey of English corpora and native-speaker usage, Muminova found that 75% of speakers recognized the cultural origins of idioms such as *break the ice*, linking them explicitly to social customs of hospitality and interaction. This echoes earlier observations by linguists: Pinnavaia (2002) notes that because idioms are “so strongly tied to the culture and history of the people that generate them, their top structures always tell a story that justifies their bottom meanings”. In other words, each idiom often has an origin in a concrete cultural context (sailor’s vocabulary, rural life, religious texts, etc.) which provides the mental imagery behind it. When learners understand that background story, they can more easily infer an idiom’s meaning.

Phraseological units thus function as cultural artifacts. Aliyeva (2025) emphasizes that idioms “draw on shared human experiences ... while also encoding culturally specific knowledge”. They reflect collective values, norms, and metaphors of a speech community. Ter-Minasova, as cited by Murodova (2022), famously described language as “a mirror of the surrounding world”, and phraseology is one of the richest mirrors: it “carries the linguocultural code of the nation” by covering centuries of history, beliefs, and traditions. Indeed, Murodova points out that idioms in any language typically illustrate a people’s way of life, history, and moral values. Thus, studies of idioms often adopt a linguocultural perspective, examining how culture-specific norms and stereotypes are embedded in fixed expressions.

At the same time, researchers also find that idioms exhibit both universality and cultural specificity. Cognitive linguists have shown that many idioms are based on common conceptual metaphors (e.g. *the heart for love*, or *balance for justice*) that recur across languages. Aliyeva’s cross-cultural study confirms that certain underlying metaphors (like *GOOD IS WARM* or *EXCESS IS FULLNESS*) appear in English idioms as well as in other languages. However, the particular imagery and lexical items vary. Aliyeva finds that English idioms often involve cultural allusions specific to Anglo history or folklore, whereas idioms in Turkish, French, or Russian might invoke different symbols and stories. For example, English

idioms are replete with references to Christianity and medieval life (e.g. for whom the bell tolls, Achilles' heel), reflecting Western cultural heritage, while French idioms might draw on heraldic or historical imagery unfamiliar to English speakers. Similarly, Murodova and colleagues have noted that translating idioms requires finding equivalents that fit the target culture's "national mentality," underscoring that each language's phraseology has unique cultural stamps.

Dialectal variation also reflects cultural divergence. Moon (1998) and others have observed that differences between British and American English idioms often mirror distinct cultural experiences. For instance, Americans might say take it with a grain of salt or fall in love head over heels, whereas speakers in Britain express the same ideas with slightly different wording. Muminova's corpus study similarly found that some common English phrases have different referents in the US versus the UK (e.g. biscuit meaning "cookie" in Britain but "bread roll" in America). These findings suggest that regional English-speaking cultures can evolve their own variant idioms or uses, even when the underlying concept is shared.

In summary, the literature portrays idioms as windows into culture. They arise from historical events, occupational jargon, folklore, religion, and everyday life. Many authors stress that idiomatic meaning can only be fully grasped by understanding the cultural history behind an expression. We now turn to an analysis of specific cultural influences on English phraseological variation.

Main Analysis

Historical and Occupational Origins of Idioms

A significant portion of English idioms stem from the historical activities and pastimes of English-speaking peoples. Many originate in contexts that were once culturally salient. For example, several idioms come from seafaring or nautical life, reflecting the maritime heritage of England. The phrase spill the beans (to reveal a secret) allegedly comes from ancient Greek voting practices, but it found renewed metaphorical life in contexts where spilling literal containers had consequences. Similarly, idioms involving horses (straight from the horse's mouth) or carriage (fall flat on one's face) hark back to pre-industrial transport. Pinnavaia (2002) provides a vivid catalogue: English idioms arise from "sailor speech" (hands down, clear the decks), soldiers (above board, below the belt), hunting and farming (whistle past the graveyard, beat around the bush), domestic life (break bread), games (two can play at that game), and more. In each case, the idiom's image makes sense only in the original context. For instance, kick the bucket (meaning "die") is often said to derive from a method of slaughtering pigs in rural England. Without that cultural-historical picture, the phrase is inexplicable.

Because these idioms are bound to earlier ways of life, they can also vary in currency and interpretation across generations and regions. An older British idiom might be unknown to many modern Americans, while the US might coin new idioms from 20th-century culture. In this way, historical culture drives phraseological variation. The study of such origins helps explain why idioms seem arbitrary at first glance: each fixed expression "unfolds stories that give a sense to their real meanings".

Regional and Dialectal Differences

Culture also operates at the level of region or community. Different English-speaking countries and cultures have cultivated their own idiomatic expressions based on local experiences. A clear example is found in sports metaphors: American English, influenced by baseball and American football, uses idioms like *out of left field* (unexpected) or *call the shots* (be in charge), whereas British English, shaped by cricket and soccer, offers *bowled over* (astonished) or *get the ball rolling* (start something). Similarly, an American might say *hit it out of the park* to mean doing something extremely successfully (baseball), whereas a Brit might say *hit the nail on the head* (a carpentry image) for the same idea. These differences reflect leisure and cultural activities prevalent in each society.

Regional variations also appear within Britain and America. For instance, British idioms include *up the creek without a paddle* (in trouble) and *fair play*, while Americans say *in a pickle* or *level playing field*. Even common expressions can differ slightly: as Muminova's analysis notes, some words like *biscuit* and *pavement* have different cultural referents (food item vs. sidewalk) in the US and UK. Such lexical variations in idioms underscore that regional culture shapes phraseology. As Muminova observes, "variations observed between different English dialects highlight the importance of cultural specificity in language". In other words, speakers' regional cultural identities – including local customs, history, and environment – imprint on their idiomatic vocabulary.

Not all phraseological differences are as simple as one word. Sometimes the entire idiom differs. For example, Americans say *call it a day* (stop working) whereas older British English might say *quit the ship*. When Americans say *get off the train* (stop bothering me), a Brit might say *come off the pot*. These differences can baffle learners. They arise because each phrase embeds a culturally familiar image: American English often evokes machines and processes (computers crash, cars stall), while British English sometimes retains more rustic or traditional imagery.

Metaphorical Themes and Cultural Imagery

Beyond historical origins, idioms group into metaphorical themes that show both universality and cultural variation. Common domains include body parts, animals, nature, and objects – but the specifics depend on cultural environment. For example, animal metaphors often reveal cultural fauna: English, with its temperate climate and farming tradition, has many bird and mammal idioms: *sly as a fox*, *eat like a bird*, *dog days*, *lion-hearted* (courage), *horse around*. By contrast, central Asian cultures (including Uzbek or Turkish) have more livestock metaphors like *load the ox* or poultry idioms reflecting local life. Aliyeva (2025) notes that while the metaphorical concept might be shared (e.g. *cunning* = *slyness* as fox), the specific animal can differ by ecology and folklore. For instance, English speakers say "a cold fish" (unfriendly) whereas in Turkish there is no direct equivalent, reflecting different cultural prominence of animals. Thus, cultural context determines which images become fixed in language.

Body-part idioms also show this mix of universal and specific mapping. Many languages use heart as love or head as intelligence. English idioms like *cold-hearted* or *have a good head on one's shoulders* mirror universal body metaphors. But English, with its history of biblical influence, also has unique references like "long in the tooth" (an old horse's age, meaning too

old), which only makes sense if one knows the custom of estimating a horse's age by its teeth. Without that cultural knowledge, such idioms are opaque.

Similarly, metaphors of space and movement often exploit cultural practices. Flat on one's face or hit the hay (go to sleep) reference common experiences (falling, beds) in Anglophone culture. In contrast, other cultures might use different images for the same notion. These differences underline that phraseological variation often stems from different cultural experiences, even when expressing the same underlying concept.

Contemporary and Media Influences

Culture is not static, and neither is phraseology. Modern idiomatic expressions evolve with new cultural phenomena. The rise of mass media, the Internet, and global culture has spawned fresh idioms and revived others. For example, Muminova's case studies found that digital media and youth culture have given rise to expressions like "Netflix and chill," which emerged from social media slang to mean casual sexual invitation. This phrase would have been incomprehensible a generation ago, but it captures a new social behavior. Other modern idioms include "Google it" (now so common it's almost literal, but originally culture-specific) or "kick the tires and light the fires" (colloquial American military phrase).

Even global brands and events contribute. Idioms like "if it's not broke, don't fix it" reflect American pragmatic culture and are tied to mid-20th-century advertising. References to popular culture (movies, music) increasingly enter everyday speech. These examples show that as society changes, so does its idiomatic language. For linguists, this means phraseological variation must be studied with attention to contemporary cultural shifts. As one scholar observed, "As modern media continues to shape language, new phrases emerge that capture contemporary social dynamics".

English as a global lingua franca also creates hybrid phrases. Non-native speakers sometimes coin or spread anglicized idioms informed by their own cultures. For example, a bilingual English-Uzbek speaker might say "eat from two sides of the pillow" (a calque of Uzbek "ko'rpa chetini yeyish") to mean "be indecisive," blending imagery from two cultures. Such cross-pollination is a current frontier of phraseological variation.

Discussion

The analysis above underscores that culture is deeply woven into English phraseology. Idioms do not exist in a cultural vacuum; they are born from specific ways of life. Recognizing this helps in several ways. First, for language teaching and acquisition, instructors should stress the cultural backstory of idioms so learners can decode meaning rather than memorize opaque phrases. In particular, exposing learners to the history or scenario behind an idiom (for example, explaining how "spill the beans" originally meant revealing a secret in a game) makes the meaning transparent. Empirical studies confirm that learners who receive such cultural context recall idioms better.

Second, in translation and cross-cultural communication, awareness of cultural specificity is vital. Direct translation of an idiom often fails because the metaphor may not resonate in the other culture. As Murodova (2022) emphasizes, phraseological units "reflect the culture and national mentality" of one language, so translators must find culture-appropriate equivalents. For example, translating "on tenterhooks" (an old English idiom meaning in a state of suspense) into Uzbek would require a completely different image

(perhaps “tong atab o‘tiribdi” – “waiting on tiptoe”) that conveys the same feeling in Uzbek culture.

Third, recognizing dialectal variation can prevent misunderstanding even among native speakers. A British person might not immediately understand American idioms like “jump on the bandwagon”, and vice versa. As Muminova’s survey indicated, even native speakers find some idioms puzzling without context, especially newly minted ones. Therefore, effective communication – in business, travel, or multicultural societies – requires sensitivity to phraseological differences.

Finally, the very persistence of idioms shows that languages carry their histories forward. As Muminova concludes, understanding English phraseology reveals “the intricate relationship between language and culture” and the need for continual research to keep pace with change. In this sense, phraseology is both a static legacy and a dynamic practice.

Conclusion

English phraseological variation is strongly guided by culture. Idioms and fixed expressions serve as vessels of shared experience, historical memory, and societal values. This study has shown that cultural context underlies both the meaning and usage of idioms: from the rural or nautical origins of many expressions, to differences between British and American variants, to modern media-driven slang. Our review confirms that while some conceptual metaphors are universal (e.g. life is a journey, heart is love), each culture selects its own imagery and lexical choices. As English continues to be used worldwide, it will incorporate influences from other cultures as well, creating new idioms and shifts in usage.

Future research could further map these trends, especially in the age of social media and global communication. For educators and translators, the implication is clear: idioms must be taught and interpreted as culturally embedded phenomena. By appreciating the “linguocultural code” that idioms carry, learners and speakers can achieve deeper comprehension and more effective intercultural dialogue. Understanding phraseological variation thus opens a window into how English-speaking communities see the world, revealing that language is not just a neutral code but a cultural tapestry woven through history and habit.

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