



PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS WITH FOOD COMPONENTS: SEMANTIC, COGNITIVE, AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of phraseological units containing food components in English and Karakalpak languages from cognitive, semantic, and linguocultural perspectives. The study focuses on metaphorization as a key mechanism in the formation of idioms and examines how food-related expressions encode cultural values and conceptual models. The research demonstrates that while both languages share universal cognitive patterns in metaphor formation, they differ significantly in their cultural interpretations and evaluative orientations. English idioms tend to emphasize individual traits and psychological states, often with negative connotations, whereas Karakalpak expressions reflect social harmony, ethical norms, and positive communicative behavior. The findings confirm that phraseological units function as linguistic representations of cultural identity and collective cognition, serving as a bridge between language, thought, and culture.

Introduction

Phraseological units constitute one of the most expressive and culturally significant layers of language. As noted by Vinogradov (1977), they represent stable combinations of words whose meanings are often not deducible from their individual components. Beyond their communicative function, phraseological units encode cultural knowledge, historical experience, and collective worldview.

In recent decades, the study of phraseology has shifted from purely structural and semantic approaches toward cognitive and linguocultural paradigms. Within this framework, idioms are understood as reflections of human conceptualization processes. One of the central mechanisms in this process is metaphorization, which allows speakers to understand abstract concepts through more concrete and familiar domains. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is not simply a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of thought, structuring how people perceive and interpret reality.

Food, as a universal and essential aspect of human life, serves as one of the most productive source domains for metaphorical thinking. As Wierzbicka (1997) argues, food

concepts are deeply embedded in cultural value systems and reflect moral and social norms of a given community. The sensory qualities of food—such as taste, texture, temperature, and freshness—are frequently used to describe human emotions, character traits, and social behavior. This phenomenon can be observed across languages, although the specific meanings and connotations vary depending on cultural context.

In English, idioms like “a bad egg,” “cool as a cucumber,” “a hard nut to crack,” and “sour grapes” illustrate how food-related concepts are used to evaluate personality and behavior. Similarly, in the Karakalpak language, expressions such as “tili maylı” demonstrate how food metaphors are employed to describe communicative competence and social interaction. These examples highlight both universal cognitive tendencies and culturally specific patterns in metaphorical thinking.

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in cognitive linguistics, particularly in the conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson. According to this theory, metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of human thought. It involves systematic mappings between a source domain (e.g., food) and a target domain (e.g., human character).

Scholars argue that idioms are culturally marked units that encode collective knowledge and social attitudes. Food-related phraseologisms are particularly significant in this regard, as they are deeply embedded in everyday life and cultural practices.

Analysis of English Phraseological Units

“A Bad Egg”

The idiom “a bad egg” is a prominent example of a food-based metaphor used to describe a person negatively. Structurally, it is a nominative phraseologism consisting of an adjective and a noun. Semantically, it denotes a morally unreliable or corrupt individual.

The metaphorical basis of this expression lies in the physical properties of an egg. While an egg may appear intact externally, it can be spoiled internally.

Historically, the idiom originated in American English in the mid-19th century. It reflects a cultural awareness of deception and moral evaluation.

Semantically, it denotes a morally unreliable or corrupt individual.

According to Vinogradov’s (1977) classification, this idiom can be considered a phraseological unity, as its meaning arises from metaphorical reinterpretation of its components. The metaphorical basis lies in the physical property of an egg that may appear normal externally but be spoiled internally. This contrast is mapped onto human character, suggesting moral inconsistency.

From a cognitive perspective, this idiom reflects the conceptual metaphor MORALITY IS FOOD QUALITY, as described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Pragmatically, it functions as an evaluative and expressive unit, often conveying criticism or warning, which aligns with Searle’s (1979) theory of speech acts.

English phraseology offers a wide range of food metaphors, including:

“Cool as a cucumber” → emotional calmness (temperature → emotional state)

“A hard nut to crack” → difficulty or complexity (texture → problem-solving)

“Sour grapes” → envy or bitterness (taste → emotional reaction)

These examples demonstrate that English metaphorical models are largely grounded in sensory perception and individual psychological experience.

Analysis of Karakalpak Phraseological Unit

“Tili Maylı” (Oily Tongue)

The phrase “tili maylı” is a positive evaluative idiom in the Karakalpak language, used to describe a person who speaks smoothly, persuasively, and pleasantly.

Structural Analysis

The phrase consists of:

tili (tongue) → representing speech ability through metonymy

maylı (oily, soft) → an adjective conveying smoothness and pleasantness

The syntactic structure follows an attributive pattern (noun + adjective).

Semantic and Cognitive Interpretation

The metaphor is based on the association between oil and smoothness. Just as oil reduces friction, a “smooth tongue” facilitates communication and social interaction. This reflects the conceptual metaphor: COMMUNICATION IS A SMOOTH SUBSTANCE.

In Karakalpak and broader Turkic cultures, polite and harmonious communication is highly valued. The ability to speak kindly and persuasively is considered a positive social trait. Thus, the idiom reflects not only linguistic meaning but also cultural norms and ethical values.

A comparison of English and Karakalpak food-based phraseological units reveals both shared features and significant differences.

Shared Features

- Both languages use food as a source domain for metaphor;
- Both rely on sensory and physical properties (taste, texture, quality);
- Both reflect anthropocentric perspectives.

Differences

- English idioms often emphasize individual character and psychological states, frequently highlighting negative traits;
- Karakalpak idioms tend to focus on social harmony, ethics, and positive evaluation;
- English metaphors are often based on contradiction and irony, whereas Karakalpak metaphors emphasize balance and social cohesion.

The findings suggest that while metaphorization is a universal cognitive mechanism, its linguistic realization is shaped by cultural context. Food-related phraseological units demonstrate how everyday experiences are transformed into symbolic representations of abstract concepts.

In English, the emphasis on individuality and psychological complexity is reflected in idioms that often carry critical or ironic meanings. In contrast, Karakalpak phraseology highlights the importance of social relationships and moral behavior, resulting in more positively oriented expressions.

This difference supports the view that language is not only a system of communication but also a repository of cultural knowledge and values.

Conclusion

The study of food-based phraseological units in English and Karakalpak languages confirms that metaphorization plays a central role in the formation of idioms. These linguistic units serve as important tools for expressing human character, emotions, and social relations.

The comparison of “a bad egg” and “tili maylı” illustrates how similar metaphorical processes can lead to different cultural interpretations. While both idioms are based on the transfer of physical properties to abstract qualities, their meanings reflect distinct cultural priorities.

In conclusion, phraseological units should be analyzed as complex phenomena that integrate semantic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions. Their study provides valuable insights into the relationship between language, thought, and culture, and contributes to a deeper understanding of how human societies conceptualize and evaluate reality.

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