SEMANTIC SIDE OF IDIOMATIC PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS: VERBAL VARIATIONS AND THEIR SPECIFIC FEATURES

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Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada ingliz tilidagi idiomatik frazeologik birliklarning semantik xususiyatlari bo'yicha keng qamrovli tahlil taqdim etilgan bo'lib, ayniqsa, fe'l idiomalari va ularning o'ziga xos o'zgarish modellari alohida e'tiborga olinadi. Idiomalar ingliz leksikonining muhim qismi bo'lib, madaniy jihatdan belgilangan, semantik jihatdan murakkab birliklarni tashkil etadi, ularning ma'nosi alohida komponentlarning ma'nosidan kelib chiqib tushuntirib bo'lmaydi. Tadqiqot fe'l idiomalarning semantik yaxlitligi, metaforik motivatsiyasi, kognitiv asoslari, grammatik moslashuvchanligi va leksiko-strukturaviy o'zgaruvchanligini o'rganadi.

Kognitiv lingvistika, frazeologiya nazariyasi, diskurs tadqiqotlari va korpus namunalariga tayangan holda maqola fe'l idiomalarning ingliz frazeologiyasida dinamik subsistema shakllantirishini ko'rsatadi, ular harakatlar, holatlar, his-tuyg'ular va ijtimoiy munosabatlarni metaforik va madaniy jihatdan integratsiyalashgan strukturalar orqali ifodalash imkonini beradi. Bundan tashqari, izoh berish va tillararo tarjima bilan bog'liq muammolar tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, fe'l idiomalari zamonaviy muloqotda sezilarli semantik, stilistik va pragmatik funksiyalarni bajaradi va ularni aniq tushunish uchun ko'p qirrali lingvistik yondashuv talab etiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: idioma, frazeologik birliklar, fe'l idiomalari, semantika, idiomalar o'zgaruvchanligi, metafora, kognitiv lingvistika, frazeologiya, pragmatika.

Аннотация. В данной статье представлен всесторонний анализ семантических характеристик английских идиоматических фразеологических единиц, с особым акцентом на глагольные идиомы и их уникальные модели вариации. Идиомы являются важной частью английского лексикона, представляя собой культурно обусловленные, семантически сложные единицы, значения которых не могут быть выведены из значений отдельных компонентов. Исследование рассматривает семантическую целостность, метафорическую мотивацию, когнитивные основы, грамматическую адаптируемость и лексико-структурную изменчивость глагольных идиом. Опираясь на когнитивную лингвистику, теорию фразеологии, дискурсные исследования и корпусные примеры, статья демонстрирует, как глагольные идиомы формируют динамическую подсистему в английской фразеологии, способную выражать действия, состояния, эмоции и социальные взаимодействия через метафорические и культурно встроенные структуры.

Кроме того, анализируются проблемы интерпретации и межъязыкового перевода.

Результаты исследования показывают, что глагольные идиомы выполняют значительные семантические, стилистические и прагматические функции в современном общении и требуют многоуровневого лингвистического подхода для их точного понимания.

Ключевые слова: *идиома, фразеологические единицы, глагольные идиомы, семантика, вариативность идиом, метафора, когнитивная лингвистика, фразеология, прагматика.*

Abstract. *This article provides an extensive analysis of the semantic characteristics of English idiomatic phraseological units, focusing specifically on verbal idioms and their unique patterns of variation. Idioms constitute an essential part of the English lexicon, representing culturally conditioned, semantically complex units whose meanings cannot be deduced from the meanings of their individual components. This study explores the semantic integrity, metaphorical motivation, cognitive underpinnings, grammatical adaptability, and lexical-structural variability of verbal idioms. Drawing from cognitive linguistics, phraseology theory, discourse studies, and corpus-based examples, this paper demonstrates how verbal idioms form a dynamic subsystem within English phraseology, capable of expressing actions, states, emotions, and social interactions through metaphorical and culturally embedded structures.*

Additionally, challenges of interpretation and cross-linguistic translation are analyzed.

Results suggest that verbal idioms perform significant semantic, stylistic, and pragmatic functions in modern communication and require a multilayered linguistic approach for accurate understanding.

Keywords: *idiom, phraseological units, verbal idioms, semantics, idiomatic variation, metaphor, cognitive linguistics, phraseology, pragmatics.*

Introduction

Idiomatic phraseological units constitute one of the most intricate and semantically layered components of the English linguistic system. These expressions, typically fixed or semi-fixed in structure, encode meanings that transcend the literal interpretations of their constituent elements. Their semantic value is frequently metaphorical, culturally embedded, historically conditioned, and shaped by collective cognitive models. As such, idioms demand from the interpreter not only lexical competence but also an understanding of cultural conventions, conceptual metaphors, pragmatic subtleties, and socio-historical contexts that underpin their formation and usage. Within this broad and multifaceted phraseological domain, **verbal idioms** occupy a particularly prominent position. Owing to their inherent verbal core, they encapsulate actions, processes, behavioural patterns, emotional states, and intersubjective relations, thereby functioning as highly dynamic and communicatively potent linguistic units.

Verbal idioms represent a sophisticated linguistic phenomenon whose semantic properties diverge markedly from the meanings of their individual components. For instance, expressions such as *kick the bucket* or *throw in the towel* illustrate how idiomatic meaning can evolve independently of composite lexical semantics. This semantic divergence, however, is not arbitrary: it often stems from deep-rooted metaphorical mechanisms, historically grounded practices, and culturally salient conceptual frameworks. When examined through the lens of cognitive linguistics, many verbal idioms reveal a high degree of conceptual coherence, reflecting universal or culturally specific mappings that structure human thought. Furthermore, verbal idioms exhibit varying degrees of structural elasticity. They may undergo grammatical transformation (e.g., change of tense or voice) or lexical adjustment (e.g., substitution with near-

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synonymous elements), while still maintaining their idiomatic status. Such controlled variability underscores their dual nature as both fixed phraseological units and adaptable communicative tools.

Given these characteristics, verbal idioms merit detailed scholarly investigation. Their semantic architecture is multi-layered: it incorporates literal, metaphorical, cultural, and contextual components that interact in complex ways. Additionally, verbal idioms perform a broad array of pragmatic functions, such as intensifying emotional expression, fostering interpersonal rapport, introducing humour, or condensing complex ideas into compact linguistic forms. These functions render verbal idioms indispensable not only in everyday conversation but also in literary narration, political discourse, journalism, and academic communication.

The present study aims to deliver a comprehensive and theoretically grounded exploration of the semantic features of idiomatic phraseological units, with particular emphasis on verbal idioms and their mechanisms of variation**.** The analysis draws on major theoretical frameworks within phraseology (notably the works of Kunin, Cowie, and Moon), cognitive metaphor theory (as developed by Lakoff and Johnson), and semantic theory (including contributions from Cruse and Palmer), while also integrating insights from discourse analysis and cross-linguistic studies. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this article seeks to illuminate the structural, semantic, cognitive, and pragmatic dimensions of verbal idioms and to demonstrate their significance within the broader phraseological system of the English language.

Methods

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative linguistic design, grounded in contemporary theories of phraseology, semantics, and cognitive linguistics. The methodological framework integrates several interrelated components aimed at capturing both the structural and semantic complexity of verbal idiomatic expressions. The procedures employed are outlined below. This corpus-based methodology was chosen to guarantee the empirical robustness, frequency relevance, and contextual accuracy of the idioms under investigation. An initial list of idiomatic units was generated, from which 120 high-frequency verbal idioms were systematically selected based on criteria of frequency, idiomatic stability, and representativeness across different genres and registers. These idioms served as the dataset for subsequent semantic, cognitive, and structural analyses.

Semantic and Cognitive Analysis

The semantic analysis involved categorizing the selected idioms according to several analytic parameters:

- semantic transparency (transparent, semi-transparent, opaque)
- type of metaphorical motivation**,** including underlying conceptual metaphors, metonymic shifts, and culturally embedded narrative models
- semantic domains to which the idioms belong, such as action, emotional states, cognition, social relations, or evaluative behaviour

The cognitive analysis was conducted within the theoretical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). This approach facilitated the identification of the underlying conceptual mappings that structure idiomatic meaning, enabling

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the interpretation of idioms not merely as arbitrary linguistic units but as reflections of broader cognitive and cultural schemata.

Structural and Variational Analysis

To investigate the structural behaviour and flexibility of verbal idioms, each unit was examined along four dimensions:

- grammatical variability, including modifications in tense, aspect, voice, and person
- lexical variability, such as synonymic substitution, intensification, reduction, or expansion of components
- syntactic flexibility, particularly the idiom's ability to undergo passivization, nominalization, or insertion of additional elements
- pragmatic variation, including shifts conditioned by formality level, discourse type, and communicative intention

A comparative perspective was applied to identify divergences and convergences in idiom usage across British and American English, with the aim of determining the extent to which idiomatic forms exhibit cross-dialectal stability or variation. This component of the methodology made it possible to classify idioms according to their degree of structural fixity, ranging from fully fixed idioms to partially flexible multi-word expressions.

Discourse Analysis

To assess idioms within genuine communicative settings, a discourse-analytic procedure was conducted. Instances of idiom usage were identified and examined across diverse textual environments, including:

- journalistic discourse (newspapers, magazines, editorials)
- literary texts (novels, short stories, and essays)
- political and public speeches
- digital and online communication (blogs, interviews, informal posts, transcripts)

This methodological step enabled the identification of the pragmatic functions idioms perform in discourse—such as stance-taking, emotional colouring, humour, mitigation, or rhetorical emphasis—and facilitated an examination of how idiomatic meaning may shift or expand across different communicative contexts.

Results

The findings of the study reveal several salient patterns concerning the semantic composition, structural behaviour, and pragmatic distribution of verbal idioms in English. The analysis offers a nuanced understanding of how idioms operate as culturally mediated, cognitively motivated, and structurally flexible multi-word expressions.

Semantic Structure and Levels of Transparency

The examination of semantic transparency demonstrates that verbal idioms predominantly fall into the semi-transparent and opaque categories, confirming that idiomatic meaning is seldom recoverable through literal interpretation alone. The distribution observed in the dataset is as follows:

13% of idioms were classified as *transparent*, meaning that their figurative interpretation is at least partially accessible through literal semantics.

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47% were *semi-transparent*, indicating that their meanings are motivated by recognizable metaphors or conceptual associations, even if not directly inferable.

40% were *opaque*, with meanings entirely unpredictable from the meanings of their component parts.

This distribution underscores the centrality of metaphorical, cultural, and experiential knowledge in idiom comprehension. Transparent idioms are comparatively rare, whereas semi-transparent and opaque idioms dominate the verbal idiom inventory, corroborating the view that idiomatic meaning is fundamentally non-compositional and deeply embedded in cultural cognition.

Dominant Conceptual Metaphors Underlying Verbal Idioms

The analysis further demonstrates that English verbal idioms are grounded in a limited set of highly productive conceptual metaphors. These recurrent metaphorical frameworks provide semantic coherence across idioms that, on the surface, may appear arbitrary. The most frequently identified conceptual metaphors include:

emotion is heat → *to blow off steam*, *to let off steam*

life is a journey → *to hit a dead end*, *to go off track*

argument is war → *to defend one's position*, *to shoot down an idea*

success / failure is up / down → *to go up in flames*, *to fall apart*

These conceptual mappings function as cognitive templates that organize speakers' interpretations of idiomatic expressions. The presence of such metaphors substantiates the cognitive-linguistic claim that idioms are not idiosyncratic but rather reflect deeply established patterns in human thought and cultural experience.

Grammatical and Lexical Variability

These findings demonstrate that idioms serve as multifunctional pragmatic devices, enabling speakers and writers to convey affect, interpersonal stance, and stylistic nuance in compact and culturally resonant ways. The prevalence of idioms in both formal and informal registers confirms their adaptability and communicative efficiency.

Discussion

The results of the study underscore the status of verbal idioms as a uniquely expressive, cognitively grounded, and structurally adaptable subset of English phraseology. Their semantic behaviour confirms that idiomatic meaning does not arise from straightforward compositional processes but is instead shaped by a complex interplay of cognitive, cultural, historical, and discursive factors. The following discussion elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Semantic Implications

The dominance of semi-transparent and opaque idioms in the dataset substantiates the argument that idiom comprehension extends far beyond lexical decoding. Understanding idiomatic meaning presupposes:

- cultural literacy,
- knowledge of historically embedded practices and narratives,
- familiarity with conventional metaphors and symbolic associations.
- Cognitive Interpretation

The centrality of conceptual metaphors in structuring idiomatic meaning attests to the deeply embodied and cognitively motivated nature of verbal idioms. Expressions such as *to swallow one's pride*, *to bend the rules*, or *to break the ice* exemplify how abstract psychological or social phenomena are conceptualized through mappings grounded in bodily experience. These idioms manifest recurring cognitive schemas—such as *emotion is a substance, social interaction is physical contact, or obstacles are barriers*—which govern human perception and categorization. This finding aligns with the principles of cognitive linguistics, particularly the idea that idioms reflect systematic patterns in human conceptualization rather than random lexical conventions. The strong presence of metaphorically motivated idioms thus confirms that phraseology is an integral component of the cognitive architecture of language users.

Structural Flexibility

One of the more significant findings concerns the extent of grammatical and lexical flexibility exhibited by verbal idioms. While traditional phraseological theory frequently portrays idioms as structurally rigid expressions, the data indicate that many idioms permit controlled variation without losing idiomaticity. For example:

- passivization (*The beans were spilled*)
- tense and aspect modification (*He has been bending the rules*)
- limited lexical substitution (*to keep an eye on / to keep one's eyes open*)
- nominalization (*the breaking of the ice*)

This semi-fixed nature renders verbal idioms more adaptable than other idiomatic categories—such as nominal, adjectival, or prepositional idioms—which are generally more resistant to structural manipulation. The flexibility of verbal idioms may explain their elevated frequency and productivity in natural discourse.

Pragmatic Significance

The study also reveals that idioms serve substantial pragmatic and interpersonal functions, beyond their semantic or lexical content. They facilitate:

emphatic and expressive meaning**,**

stance-taking and attitude signalling**,**

euphemistic softening**,**

humour, irony, and evaluative colouring**,**

solidarity-building within social interaction.

These pragmatic dimensions highlight the communicative efficiency of idioms: they compress complex meanings into compact, vivid, and culturally intelligible linguistic packages.

Idioms thus function not merely as lexical adornments but as strategic rhetorical tools that allow speakers to negotiate social identities, manage interpersonal relations, and convey nuanced attitudes.

Implications for Cross-Linguistic Study and Pedagogy

The cultural specificity and metaphorical grounding of idioms present significant challenges in translation, interpretation, and second-language acquisition. Direct lexical equivalents are often unavailable or misleading, compelling translators to choose between literal translation, functional approximation, paraphrasing, or cultural adaptation.

For example, the English idiom *to break the news* inherently carries a negative evaluative load, which may not correspond to idiomatic formulations in other languages.

These findings underscore the pedagogical necessity of teaching idioms not as isolated lexical items but as culturally embedded and cognitively motivated expressions. Effective idiom instruction should therefore incorporate:

- cross-cultural comparisons,
- metaphor awareness training,
- contextualized examples,
- discourse-based practice.

Developing these competencies can significantly enhance learners' communicative fluency and intercultural competence.

Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to phraseological theory by illustrating that verbal idioms are neither wholly fixed nor entirely flexible; rather, they occupy an intermediate space characterized by constrained variability. This challenges dichotomous classifications often found in earlier phraseological research and supports more recent views that idioms should be conceptualized as constructional templates with definable but permeable boundaries.

Furthermore, the integration of semantic, cognitive, and discourse-analytic approaches provides a multidimensional perspective on idiomatic meaning, highlighting the need for interdisciplinary methodologies in phraseological research.

Conclusion

The present study provides a comprehensive analysis of verbal idiomatic phraseological units in English, with particular emphasis on their semantic, structural, cognitive, and pragmatic dimensions. The findings demonstrate that verbal idioms constitute a highly expressive and cognitively motivated class of linguistic constructions whose meaning cannot be fully accounted for by compositional principles alone. Instead, idiomatic semantics is mediated by metaphorical structures, cultural knowledge, and historical conventions, highlighting the intricate interplay between language, cognition, and socio-cultural experience.

The analysis of grammatical and lexical variability reveals that verbal idioms, while semi-fixed, exhibit considerable structural flexibility. This characteristic allows idioms to function dynamically in diverse communicative contexts, contributing to their productivity and frequency in natural discourse. Furthermore, the study underscores the multifaceted pragmatic functions of idioms, including emotional intensification, stance expression, euphemistic mitigation, humour, and discourse cohesion. Such functions reinforce the notion that idioms are not merely lexical items but also essential instruments of rhetorical and interpersonal negotiation.

From a theoretical perspective, the results support a cognitive-linguistic understanding of idiomatic expression, wherein idioms are viewed as culturally grounded constructions shaped by conceptual metaphors and embodied cognitive schemas. Practically, these insights have significant implications for cross-linguistic studies, translation, and second-language pedagogy.

Idioms' cultural specificity necessitates targeted instructional strategies that integrate metaphor awareness, discourse context, and cross-cultural equivalence to enhance learners' interpretative competence and communicative fluency.

In sum, verbal idioms emerge as a linguistically rich and cognitively salient phenomenon, bridging lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic domains. Their study not only deepens our understanding of phraseology in English but also contributes to broader insights into the relationship between language, thought, and culture. Future research could expand this framework to explore idiomatic variation in multilingual contexts, diachronic shifts in metaphorical motivation, and the psycholinguistic mechanisms underlying idiom processing.

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