

**The Similarities and differences in idioms across languages and cultures**

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**Abstract:** Idioms are fascinating linguistic phenomena that offer a unique window into the cultural nuances and historical developments of different societies. They are expressions whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal meaning of their individual words, making them particularly challenging for language learners and intriguing for linguists. This article will explore the similarities and differences in idioms across various languages and cultures, shedding light on their universal and culture-specific aspects.

**Keywords:** Idioms, cross-cultural communication, linguistics, figurative language, cultural expressions

**Introduction:**

Human language is a complex system that allows for the communication of intricate ideas and emotions. Beyond the literal meaning of words, languages often employ figurative expressions to convey richer and more nuanced meanings. Among these, idioms stand out as particularly illustrative of a language's unique character. An idiom is a phrase or expression that typically presents a figurative, non-literal meaning attached to the phrase; but some phrases become figurative idioms while retaining the literal meaning of the phrase. For example, "kick the bucket" means to die, an entirely different meaning from the literal interpretation of kicking a bucket. The prevalence of idioms in everyday conversation and literature underscores their importance in understanding a language and, by extension, its culture. This paper aims to delve into the intriguing world of idioms, comparing and contrasting their manifestations across different linguistic and cultural landscapes.

**Relevance of Work:**

Understanding idioms is crucial for effective cross-cultural communication. Misinterpreting an idiom can lead to misunderstandings, humorous errors, or even offense. For language learners, grasping idiomatic expressions is a significant step towards achieving fluency and cultural competence. For linguists and anthropologists, the study of idioms offers valuable insights into the cognitive processes, shared experiences, and historical trajectories of various communities. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalized world, the ability to navigate linguistic and cultural differences is paramount, and a deeper appreciation for idiomatic expressions contributes significantly to this endeavor.

**Purpose:**

The primary purpose of this article is to:

1. Identify common themes and concepts that manifest in idiomatic expressions across different languages and cultures.
2. Highlight significant differences in the imagery, origin, and cultural connotations of idioms.
3. Discuss the underlying reasons for these similarities and differences, considering historical, geographical, and societal factors.
4. Emphasize the importance of cultural context in interpreting and using idioms correctly.

**Materials and Methods of Research:**

This research will employ a qualitative, comparative linguistic approach. The primary materials will consist of a diverse collection of idioms from several languages, including but not limited to English, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, and Russian. These idioms will be sourced from dictionaries, linguistic corpora, and native speaker insights.

The research methodology will involve:

- **Thematic Analysis:** Grouping idioms from different languages by common conceptual themes (e.g., emotions, success, failure, time, body parts).
- **Comparative Analysis:** Directly comparing idioms that express similar concepts but use different imagery or vice versa.
- **Etymological Research:** Investigating the historical origins and cultural contexts of selected idioms to understand their evolution.
- **Consultation with Native Speakers:** Where possible, engaging with native speakers to gain nuanced understandings of idiomatic usage and connotations.

**Results and Discussion:**

The study of idioms across languages reveals a fascinating interplay of universal human experiences and unique cultural perspectives.

**Similarities in Idioms:**

Despite vast linguistic differences, certain conceptual similarities in idioms are frequently observed:

- **Universal Human Experiences:** Idioms often reflect fundamental human experiences such as birth, death, hunger, love, and anger. For instance, many languages have idioms related to the heart signifying emotions ("heart of gold," "broken-hearted").
- **Body Parts:** Body parts are frequently used in idioms across cultures to represent abstract concepts. "To have cold feet" (English), "tener los pies fríos" (Spanish) both mean to be nervous.
- **Animals:** Animals are common figures in idioms, often used to symbolize human traits or behaviors. "To kill two birds with one stone" (English) and its equivalents in many languages ("matar dos pájaros de un tiro" in Spanish, "一石二鳥" (yī shí èr niǎo) in Chinese) demonstrate this.
- **Nature and Environment:** Elements of nature like water, fire, and weather are also common sources of idiomatic expressions. "To be in hot water" (English) and "estar en aprietos" (Spanish, literally "to be in difficulties") convey a similar sense of trouble.
- **Metaphorical Extensions:** Many idioms stem from universal metaphorical extensions. For example, "light" often symbolizes understanding or happiness, while "darkness" can signify ignorance or sadness.

**Differences in Idioms:**

While similarities exist, the divergences in idioms are equally compelling, highlighting distinct cultural nuances:

- **Literal Imagery:** Even when conveying a similar meaning, the literal imagery used can be vastly different. For example, "to die" in English can be "kick the bucket," while in French, it might be "casser sa pipe" (to break one's pipe) or in German "den Löffel abgeben" (to hand in the spoon). These reflect different cultural histories and daily life experiences.
- **Cultural Values and Beliefs:** Idioms often encapsulate specific cultural values, beliefs, and taboos. For instance, idioms related to family, honor, or food can vary significantly based on

a culture's emphasis on these aspects. In Arabic, many idioms revolve around hospitality and honor, reflecting their cultural importance.

- **Historical and Geographical Context:** Historical events, local customs, and geographical features profoundly influence idiom formation. An idiom about sailing might be prevalent in a maritime culture but absent in a landlocked one.
- **Humor and Tone:** The humor or tone embedded in an idiom can also differ. What is considered witty or playful in one culture might be seen as offensive or nonsensical in another.
- **Uniqueness of Concept:** Some idioms are entirely unique to a particular language, expressing a concept or sentiment that doesn't have a direct idiomatic equivalent elsewhere, requiring a more elaborate explanation.

### **Conclusion:**

The exploration of idioms across languages and cultures reveals a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity interwoven with threads of shared human experience. While universal themes and metaphorical tendencies lead to intriguing similarities, the unique historical trajectories, geographical contexts, and cultural values of different societies manifest in the distinct imagery and connotations of their idioms.

For language learners, understanding these similarities and differences is paramount for achieving true fluency and cultural competence. For linguists and cross-cultural communicators, idioms offer invaluable insights into the intricate relationship between language, thought, and culture. Ultimately, the study of idioms underscores the profound truth that language is not merely a tool for communication but a living embodiment of a people's history, values, and worldview. Continued research into this fascinating area will undoubtedly deepen our appreciation for the linguistic and cultural richness of our world.

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