

Cultural Specificity and Universality in English Phraseology

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Abstract: *Phraseology, encompassing idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions, serves as a mirror to both the unique cultural heritage and shared human experiences embedded in language. This article explores the dual nature of English phraseological units, examining their cultural specificity—rooted in historical, social, and environmental contexts unique to English-speaking societies—and their universality, which aligns with cross-linguistic cognitive patterns. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory and cross-cultural comparisons, the analysis reveals how English idioms like "kick the bucket" reflect British historical practices, while metaphors such as "anger is heat" demonstrate global embodied cognition. Implications for translation, language teaching, and intercultural communication are discussed, emphasizing the need for balanced awareness of both aspects.*

Key words: *Phraseology, idioms, cultural specificity, universality, conceptual metaphors, cross-linguistic analysis, English language.*

Introduction. Phraseology refers to the study of fixed expressions in language, including idioms, collocations, and proverbs, which are characterized by their semantic non-compositionality and structural stability (Kunin, 1970). These units are not merely linguistic artifacts but repositories of cultural knowledge, encapsulating a nation's history, values, and worldview. The tension between cultural specificity—where phraseological units embody unique national traits—and universality—where they reflect shared human experiences—has been a focal point in linguistic research. In English, this duality is particularly evident, as the language draws from diverse influences including Anglo-Saxon traditions, colonial history, and global interactions.

This article investigates this interplay, guided by frameworks such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which posits that metaphors are grounded in bodily experiences and can be both universal and culturally modulated. By analyzing English phraseology in comparison to other languages (e.g., Vietnamese, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and French), we highlight how universality facilitates cross-cultural understanding, while specificity poses challenges in translation and language acquisition. The study synthesizes existing literature to provide a comprehensive overview, with implications for applied linguistics.

Literature Review. Scholarly discourse on phraseology underscores its role in reflecting the "national linguistic picture of the world," a concept defined as the fixation of a community's knowledge about reality in language units (Pimenova, 2011; Popova & Sternin, 2007). Early works by Shansky (1964) and Kunin (1970) classify phraseological units as stable word-groups with transferred meanings, emphasizing their cultural embeddedness.

Cross-cultural studies reveal that while some idioms are universal, rooted in common physiological experiences, others are nation-specific, tied to historical or geographical contexts. For instance, research on emotion metaphors, such as anger, shows shared conceptualizations across languages but with cultural elaborations. In a comparative analysis of English and Slovene phraseology, onomastic

components (e.g., proper names) highlight cultural specificity, drawing from biblical or mythological sources. Similarly, examinations of English idioms against Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and French reveal universal metaphors like "anger as heat" alongside unique expressions influenced by folklore or historical events.

The influence of universality and specificity on EFL learners' comprehension has also been explored, noting that universal elements aid interpretation, while culture-specific ones require explicit cultural knowledge (Liu & Jiang, 2013). Overall, the literature posits that phraseological units are interdependent with culture, serving as carriers of national identity.

Methodology. This article employs a qualitative, comparative approach, drawing on corpus-based analysis and conceptual metaphor theory. Data were sourced from English idiom dictionaries (e.g., Oxford Dictionary of Idioms) and corpora like the British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Cross-linguistic comparisons were informed by bilingual dictionaries and native speaker consultations, focusing on thematic categories such as emotions, body parts, and animals. Universality was assessed through shared metaphorical mappings, while specificity was identified via unique cultural allusions. Examples were selected for their representativeness, with translation equivalence tested using strategies like absolute and relative equivalents (Newmark, 1988).

Analysis. Universality in English Phraseology. Universal aspects of English phraseology stem from embodied cognition and shared human experiences, allowing for cross-linguistic parallels. Conceptual metaphors like "anger is heat" are prevalent, manifesting in idioms such as "make one's blood boil" or "add fuel to the fire." These align with Vietnamese equivalents like "tức sôi máu" (so angry that one's blood boils) and "đỗ dầu vào lửa" (pour oil into the fire), reflecting a common physiological basis where anger is perceived as rising temperature.

Body part metaphors also exhibit universality, with the heart symbolizing emotions in expressions like "heart of gold" (kind-hearted), paralleled in Russian "сердце каменное" (heart of stone) and Turkish "yüreği çürüklü" (rotten heart). Animal imagery, such as the fox for cunning ("sly as a fox"), finds echoes in Turkish "tilki gibi kurnaz" and Russian "как лиса," underscoring shared anthropomorphic attributions. Such universals facilitate translation through absolute equivalents, where form and meaning coincide, enhancing intercultural communication.

Cultural Specificity in English Phraseology

Cultural specificity arises from historical, geographical, and social contexts unique to English-speaking cultures. Idioms like "kick the bucket" (to die) originate from historical practices, possibly linked to animal slaughter or suicide methods in Britain, lacking direct equivalents in non-Western languages. Similarly, "as mad as a hatter" references mercury poisoning in 19th-century English hat-making, embodying industrial history absent in languages like Vietnamese or Azerbaijani.

Onomastic units, incorporating proper names, further illustrate specificity. "Greek gift" alludes to the Trojan Horse from classical mythology, reflecting Greco-Roman influences on English culture, while "queen's head" ties to British monarchy. In contrast to Vietnamese idioms influenced by Ying-Yang philosophy (e.g., "bầm gan sôi máu," bruise liver boil blood), English favors whole-body metonymies like "seethe with rage." French equivalents, such as "prendre la crémallière" (housewarming, from medieval traditions), highlight differing historical foci. These specifics often result in translation challenges, requiring domestication or explanatory notes to convey cultural nuances.

Implications for Translation and Language Teaching

The balance between universality and specificity impacts translation strategies. Universal metaphors allow for functional equivalence, as in rendering "packed like sardines" into Russian "как сельдь в бочке" (like herring in a barrel). However, specific idioms like "cat got your tongue?" may require cultural adaptation, as they lack parallels in Turkic languages. In EFL contexts, leveraging universals can aid comprehension, while teaching specifics enhances cultural competence (Liu & Jiang, 2013).

Conclusion. This study has demonstrated that English phraseological units are deeply intertwined with both universal human experiences and culture-specific knowledge, making them a powerful reflection of the national linguistic worldview. While conceptual metaphors such as “anger is heat” or body part symbolism show remarkable consistency across languages—including Vietnamese, Russian, Turkish, and French—other idioms are strongly bound to the unique historical, social, or geographical contexts of English-speaking cultures. Expressions like “kick the bucket” or “as mad as a hatter” illustrate how idioms serve as linguistic fossils, preserving cultural memory and identity.

The interplay between universality and specificity has important implications for translation and English language teaching. Universal phraseological patterns enhance mutual intelligibility and facilitate functional or absolute equivalence in translation. In contrast, culturally specific idioms often resist direct translation, requiring strategies such as adaptation, explanation, or domestication to preserve meaning and impact. For language learners, understanding both aspects is essential—not only to grasp idiomatic meaning but also to develop cultural competence and navigate nuanced communication in English.

Ultimately, phraseological units should be viewed not merely as vocabulary items but as carriers of cultural heritage and cognitive structures. Future research may extend these findings by exploring diachronic changes in phraseology, regional variations within English (e.g., American vs. British idioms), or the impact of globalization on idiomatic language. Integrating phraseological awareness into translation studies and EFL curricula will further enrich learners’ linguistic and intercultural skills in our increasingly interconnected world.

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