

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36719/2706-6185/57/71-76>

**Nurana İsgandarova**  
Azerbaijan State University of Economics  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2331-1218>  
nurana-ısgandarova@unec.edu.az

## The Role and Importance of Idioms in Modern English

### Abstract

This text examines the role of idioms in modern English and the challenges of translating them. Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be understood from the meanings of their individual words, so they cannot be translated literally. Hence, language learners must study idioms as complete phrases. In the past, some scholars believed translation was impossible; however, the growing need for communication between different cultures has made translation an essential skill.

Idioms play an important role in English because they make speech more expressive, vivid, and natural. They are commonly used in everyday communication, especially in informal contexts, although their use in formal situations should be limited. Idioms may describe human characteristics, emotions, physical states, problematic situations, and everyday activities.

The text also highlights differences between American and British idioms and notes that many new idioms originate in American English and spread worldwide. Successful translation of idioms requires a deep understanding of both languages and cultural contexts. Overall, idioms are a fundamental element of language that enrich communication and reflect the creativity and thinking of its speakers.

**Keywords:** *idioms, phraseology, translation, English language, communication*

**Nuranə İsgəndərova**  
Azərbaycan Dövlət İqtisad Universiteti  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2331-1218>  
nurana-ısgandarova@unec.edu.az

## Müasir ingilis dilində idiomların rolu və əhəmiyyəti

### Xülasə

Mətn müasir ingilis dilində idiomların rolu və onların tərcümə problemlərini araşdırır. İdiomlar elə sabit ifadələrdir ki, onların mənası ayrı-ayrı sözlərin mənalarından tam başa düşülmür, buna görə də onları sözbəsöz tərcümə etmək mümkün deyil. Bu səbəbdən xarici dil öyrənənlər idiomları ayrıca ifadə kimi öyrənməlidirlər. Keçmişdə bəzi alimlər tərcümənin çox çətin və hətta mümkün olmayan bir proses olduğunu düşünürdülər. Lakin müxtəlif xalqlar arasında ünsiyyət ehtiyacının artması tərcüməni həm şifahi, həm də yazılı formada vacib bir fəaliyyətə çevirmişdir.

İdiomlar ingilis dilinin mühüm hissəsidir və nitqi daha ifadəli, canlı və təbii edir. Onlar əsasən gündəlik danışiq dilində istifadə olunur və xüsusilə qeyri-rəsmi üslubda geniş yayılmışdır. Bununla yanaşı, rəsmi situasiyalarda idiomlardan istifadə edərkən ehtiyatlı olmaq lazımdır.

İdiomlar insanın xarakteri, emosiyaları, fiziki vəziyyəti, problemləli situasiyalar və gündəlik fəaliyyətlər kimi müxtəlif mövzuları ifadə edə bilər. Mətn həmçinin Amerika və Britaniya ingilis dili idiomları arasındakı fərqləri qeyd edir və yeni idiomların çoxunun Amerika ingilis dilində yaranaraq bütün dünyaya yayıldığını vurğulayır.

İdiomların düzgün tərcüməsi üçün tərcüməçi hər iki dili və mədəni konteksti yaxşı bilməlidir, çünki sözbəsöz tərcümə ifadənin mənasını dəyişə bilər. Nəticə olaraq, idiomlar dilin ayrılmaz hissəsidir və ünsiyyəti daha zəngin və təsirli edir.

**Açar sözlər:** *idiomlar, frazeologiya, tərcümə, ingilis dili, ünsiyyət*

## Introduction

Idioms are phrases and expressions whose main meanings differ from the meanings of the individual words that form them. For example, “to blow one’s top” (to get angry) and “be behind the eight ball” (to be in trouble) are genuine English idioms. Idioms originate within a language and cannot be translated literally. Therefore, foreign language learners should study them in the same way they learn vocabulary items in a dictionary.

In the early stages of civilization, it was generally believed that translators did not know the rules and principles of translation and that they lacked sufficient scientific knowledge. Later, some writers argued that translation was an unsolvable problem. For instance, as Wilhelm von Humboldt once stated, “All translations, in my opinion, are merely attempts to solve an unsolvable problem.”

However, over time, the desire of people to communicate led them to engage in both oral and written translation. Still, their translations often contained shortcomings, and there remained hope for improvement. As oral translators say, translation serves as a bridge for mutual understanding between nations. Just as a person who knows the rules and principles of engineering must also have the proper tools to construct a building, in the modern era, it is not enough to simply know English; one must know it at the required level. As we know, English is the primary language of international business and scientific conferences, as well as the leading language of global tourism. Scientific, technological, and academic information worldwide is largely presented in English. Nevertheless, for our students, understanding native speakers remains a major international challenge.

### Research

Idioms represent a complex and multifaceted aspect of language, integrating semantic, cultural, and cognitive dimensions. They are essential for achieving natural and fluent communication in English (Gibbs, 2017; Kövecses, 2020). They compensate for gaps in the language and constitute about one-third of spoken communication. Idioms should be treated as single semantic units, as their meanings are typically non-compositional and cannot be fully inferred from their constituent parts. Instead, idiomatic meaning is established through repeated use and shared linguistic conventions (Martínez, 2018; Liu, 2017). The complete phrase should be recorded in a notebook along with its grammatical features and relevant information. For example, “This tin opener has seen better days” (meaning it is rather old and worn out). This idiom is always used in the past tense. Idioms are generally informal and often contain elements of personal expression. Each idiom can sometimes convey humor or irony as an informal expression. Therefore, one must be very careful when using them. Using idioms indiscriminately simply to show one’s proficiency in English is inappropriate. For example, in formal contexts, expressions such as “How do you do, Mrs. Watson” are considered more appropriate and reflect conventional norms of politeness in language use (Wray, 2021; Chen, 2020).

Instead of saying “Do take the weight off your feet” or simply “Sit down,” we use expressions like “Do sit down” or “Have a seat.” It is important to note that the grammar of idioms can be variable, while some idioms are relatively fixed. For example, “Barking up the wrong tree” is always used in the continuous tense: *I think you’re barking up the wrong tree.*

In general, a number of expressions, such as “come to the wrong shop,” “go the way of all flesh,” and “make somebody’s blood boil,” are all phraseological idioms. In addition, there are expressions like “pay a visit,” “make one’s appearance,” or “give help,” whose translations are debated. Some linguists do not consider these as part of idiomatic phraseology. If an expression is not an idiom, we should interpret its components collectively rather than individually.

Idioms add expressiveness and precision to both written and spoken language. However, mastering idioms is not easy, and literal translations can alter their meaning. Studying the lexicology of English also involves studying its phraseology. So, what are idioms and phraseology, and how should idioms be translated?

In linguistics, *phraseology* is defined as the study of fixed and semi-fixed multi-word expressions, such as idioms and collocations, which play a central role in language use and meaning construction (Wray, 2021; Simpson & Mendis, 2019). A language’s vocabulary consists not only of individual

words but also of a number of set expressions. Idioms can express positive and negative qualities. For example, “*His fingers are all thumbs*” (he is clumsy) or “*She has iron nerves*” (she is composed).

There are also idioms that express feelings and states, both positive and negative. For instance, “*to have a horror of*” (to feel disgust) or “*to be as happy as the day’s long*” (extremely content). Idioms expressing physical feelings and states include “*to burst into tears*” (to cry) or “*She was scared stiff*” (very scared).

Another group relates to problematic situations, often using the verb “get,” such as “*to get frustrated*” (to feel defeated) or “*to get cold feet*” (to become too scared). Idioms can also indicate changes in situations, e.g., “*to change one’s mind*” (to reconsider). Those expressing relief or ease include “*to do well*” (to recover) or “*to get off lightly*” (to escape).

Idioms can convey praise or criticism, e.g., “*to go on at someone*” (to criticize). Some idioms relate to communication problems, such as “*to have a row with somebody*” (to quarrel) or “*stream of consciousness*” (flow of words). In meetings or discussions, we find expressions like “*to strike in a conversation*” (to start a conversation).

Idioms can involve body parts: “*to lend an ear*” (to listen to), “*to catch someone’s eye*” (to attract someone’s visual attention), “*to change one’s heart*” (a reversal of attitude). Others relate to daily routines, e.g., “*to do up*” (to tidy up).

Additionally, special expressions are often used in the media, such as “*all along*” (always), “*all in all*” (as a result), and “*all of a sudden*” (unexpectedly).

One group of idioms includes proverbs, which express general truths and cultural values through figurative language. For instance, “*Out of the frying pan and into the fire*” refers to moving from one difficult situation to a worse one (Boers, 2019; Wray, 2021).

There are differences between idioms used in American English and those used in British English. Many idioms found in English worldwide appear in the works of writers such as Shakespeare, Walter Scott, and Lewis Carroll. For example, among Shakespeare’s quotes is the sentence: “*As a social worker you certainly see the seamy side of life.*” In everyday English, one also encounters idioms related to sports, technical fields, law, and the military. Some of these are used in American English, some in British English, and some in both. For example, “*A happy hunting ground*” (a place where one often goes to obtain something or make money) is American English, while “*In this case the exception proves the rule*” is widely used in both American and British English.

Some evidence indicates that most new idioms originate in the United States and then spread globally. American English is developing rapidly through the Internet and other interactive media, making it interesting to observe the emergence of new idioms. Their variety and sense of humor remain strong. For instance, “*to bark up the wrong tree.*”

Translation is often described as a complex process that combines both creativity and knowledge. It requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness and interpretative skills (Wray, 2021; Al-Hassan, 2021). Naturally, a translator must know idioms well in both languages. For example, the idiom “*to pull oneself together*” – meaning “to compose oneself” – is translated based on context. “*In the middle of the lesson, he began to cry loudly. His friend said to him: ‘Pull yourself together and stop crying.’*”

Sometimes, if someone is constantly tense or worried about something, the idiom “*to take oneself in hand*” is appropriate. For example: “*I can’t help my feelings,*” he said. “*My love is stranger than my will. By and large, I’d say take yourself in hand.*” – meaning: “I cannot control my feelings. My love is stranger than my will. Overall, I would say you should compose yourself.”

It is known that a single word in Azerbaijani can be expressed with two or three words in English. For example, “*ayaq*” – leg, foot; “*barmaq*” – finger, thumb, toe. For instance, “*O əlində kitab tutmuşdu*” – “*He held a book in his hands*”, but “*O əlində körpə saxlamışdır*” – “*She held a baby in her arms.*” As we see, *hands* and *arms* have their own meanings, but in action, they perform the same function of “holding in the hands/arms.” Function comes first, meaning is secondary.

Let us consider the multiple contextual functions of a phrase. The idiom “*barmaqarası baxmaq*” in English can be translated as “*to turn a blind eye to something*” or “*ignoring on purpose*”, while the expression “*bir şeyi görməməzliyə qoymaq*” corresponds to “*to shut one’s eyes (to something).*”

In addition, “*barmaqarası baxmaq*” can also be expressed as “*to look through one’s fingers*” or “*to wink at something*.” These expressions function to indicate deliberate overlooking of a mistake.

We know that two or more phrases, if they serve the same function, are considered synonyms. For example, “*barmaqarası baxmaq*” and “*göz yummaq*” in Azerbaijani are considered synonyms if they fulfill the same function.

In English, the phrases “*at one’s wits’ end*”, “*at the end of one’s rope*”, and “*to be beside oneself*” are synonymous. They perform the same function and can be translated into Azerbaijani as “*başını itirmək, səbri tükənmək*” (to be at one’s wit’s end; to be exhausted or desperate).

Similarly, the idiom “*be between the devil and the deep blue sea*” is synonymous with “*between the rock and a hard place*.” In Azerbaijani, their equivalents are “*çətin vəziyyətdə olmaq*” (to be in a difficult situation) or “*od ilə su arasında qalmaq*” (caught between fire and water).

The phrase “*All hell to pay*” corresponds to “*be in Dutch*,” “*be in hot water*,” and “*be in the doghouse*,” but it is used in a stronger sense. In Azerbaijani, it can be rendered as “*zibilə düşmək, ciddi problemləri olmaq*” (to be in serious trouble). For example: “*Petrovic mixed up any of those embryos at the clinic, there’ll be hell to pay and you know it.*” (from “*I’ll be Seeing You*” by M.H. Clark)

The idiom “*Dawn on someone*” is synonymous with “*to see the light*” and can be translated into Azerbaijani as “*nəhayət çatdı, anladım*” (finally realized). For example: “*When no one else had shown up at work at 8:30, it finally dawned on me that it was a holiday.*” While “*see the light*” may simply mean “*to understand*,” “*dawn on someone*” carries the nuance of “*to understand after difficulty*.” Translators need to decide which variant fits better.

The idiom “*make ends meet*” refers to experiencing financial difficulty, having just enough money to cover essential needs. It is similar in meaning to “*to live from hand to mouth*” or “*to keep the wolf from the door*.” For example: “*We can hardly pay the rent, buy enough food, and keep the children in clothing. We’re barely making ends meet.*”

Using pre-existing phrases to construct metaphors is both productive and important. It is notable that metaphors built from English phrases do not need to rhyme. For instance, in Y. Katser and A. Kunin’s book “*Written Translation from Russian into English*,” the Azerbaijani proverb “*Moscow was not built in a day*” is matched to the English proverb “*Rome was not built in a day*.” Another example, “*Little pitchers have long ears*,” is translated as “*Balacalar böyüklərin söhbətinə qulaq asmağı sevirlər*.” However, the emotive and evaluative content of the proverb should not be neglected in translation. The example “*Balacalar böyüklərin söhbətinə qulaq asmağı sevirlər*” does not carry emotive meaning and does not sound like a proverb. A more expressive translation could be: “*Little pitchers have long ears*” – “*Uşaqların qulaqları şəkkdir*” or “*Beware of the children; they are curious about everything*.” This approach adds a negative nuance to the translation (Clark, 2000, p. 38).

The proverb “*Curiosity killed a cat*” can be compared to the English metaphor “*Who knows – maybe rain and maybe snow, maybe yes and maybe no*” as a cause-and-effect expression.

The artistic translation of idioms and proverbs, such as “*to be brave as a lion*” or “*to be like a lamb*,” may involve wordplay and express irony. For instance, such expressions are often used to highlight contrast or exaggeration in meaning. Translating them requires preserving both their figurative and stylistic features (Boers, 2019; Kövecses, 2020).

The linguistic tools used in metaphorical translation of idioms include both lexical and grammatical elements of speech.

“*To avoid misunderstandings, if possible, go there and find out what the situation is*” can be translated in English in several ways:

- a) “*Would you please go and see what is wrong before something happens?*”
- b) “*In order to avoid misunderstanding, would you please be so kind as to clarify the situation there?*”
- c) “*Go find out what’s wrong, or there may be trouble.*”

In this translation, “*trouble*” is a lexical element, while “*go find out*,” “*what’s*,” and “*there may be*” are grammatical and conversational tools.

Some English proverbs have rhyme, for example: “*Birds of a feather flock together,*” “*Well begun is half done,*” “*No pains, no gains,*” etc.

Finally, the origin and use of idioms are closely connected to human cognition and conceptual thinking. Idioms play a crucial role in modern English, as they enhance expressiveness and reflect how speakers conceptualize abstract ideas through metaphorical language. The use of idiomatic expressions is also considered an important indicator of advanced language proficiency and fluency (Gibbs, 2017; Kövecses, 2020). Therefore, mastering idioms contributes significantly to achieving native-like competence and natural communication.

Research in literary texts shows that famous writers use numerous idioms in their works, making the language more expressive and colorful. Studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of teachers using idioms in lessons. Therefore, idioms are an integral part of the language, making our speech more vivid, original, and expressive.

### Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of idioms in modern English communication and their impact on both language learning and translation processes. The analysis shows that idioms are widely used in everyday speech and contribute to making communication more natural, expressive, and culturally rich.

One of the key findings is that idioms present a major challenge for language learners due to their non-literal meanings. Learners often attempt to translate idioms word-for-word, which leads to misunderstanding. Therefore, idioms should be taught and learned as fixed expressions rather than individual lexical items.

The research also demonstrates that successful translation of idioms requires not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural awareness. Translators must understand the context and find equivalent expressions in the target language instead of translating directly. In some cases, functional equivalents or paraphrasing strategies are more effective. Another important result is the growing influence of American English idioms, especially through digital media and globalization. Many newly emerging idioms originate from informal communication, social media, and popular culture, and later spread internationally.

Furthermore, the study indicates that idioms enhance communicative competence. Speakers who use idioms appropriately sound more fluent and natural. However, excessive or inappropriate use of idioms, particularly in formal contexts, may negatively affect clarity and professionalism.

In conclusion, idioms play a crucial role in enriching language and improving communication. Their effective use and translation depend on both linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

### References

1. Al-Hassan, L. (2021). Translating idioms in cross-cultural contexts. *Translation Studies Journal*, 14(2), 145–160.
2. Boers, F. (2019). Evaluating second language idiom instruction: A cognitive linguistic perspective. *Language Teaching Research*, 23(1), 3–21.
3. Chen, Y. (2020). The role of idioms in intercultural communication. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 168, 44–57.
4. Gibbs, R. W. (2017). *Metaphor wars: Conceptual metaphors in human life*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Grant, L., & Bauer, L. (2018). Criteria for re-defining idioms: Are we barking up the wrong tree? *Applied Linguistics*, 39(3), 301–320.
6. Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Extended conceptual metaphor theory*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Liu, D. (2017). Idioms: Description, comprehension, acquisition, and pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 51(2), 482–489.
8. Martínez, R. (2018). Phraseology in foreign language learning and teaching. *Language Learning Journal*, 46(3), 231–242.

9. McCarthy, M., & O'Dell, F. (1994). *English vocabulary in use*. Cambridge University Press.
10. Simpson, J., & Mendis, D. (2019). A corpus-based study of idioms in academic speech. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 10(2), 345–368.
11. Wood, D. (2019). *Formulaic language and second language speech fluency: Background, evidence and applications*. Bloomsbury.
12. Wray, A. (2021). *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge University Press.

Received: 21.11.2025

Accepted: 27.02.2026