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THE ANATOMY OF IDIOMS: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE, SEMANTICS, AND CULTURAL FUNCTION**Ulvana Namig Mammadova***Master's degree student in Translation at Khazar University***ORCID:** 0009-0007-8365-5094**E-mail:** ulvana.mammadova2024@khazar.org
<http://www.doi.org/10.62706/bqiz.2026.v27.i2.41>*Açar sözlər:* anatomiya, linqvistika, semantika, mədəni, tapmaca*Ключевые слова:* анатомия, лингвистический, семантика, культурный, загадка*Keywords:* anatomy, linguistic, semantics, cultural, puzzle

Idiomatic expressions represent one of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of human communication, acting as a bridge between the rigid rules of grammar and the fluid nuances of cultural identity. At their most basic level, idioms are linguistic puzzles: phrases whose meanings are not found in the sum of their individual parts, but rather in a shared social understanding that has evolved over time [6, p.32]. This quality of non-compositionality—where "kicking the bucket" has nothing to do with pails or physical movement—distinguishes idiomatic language from literal discourse and marks the boundary where simple translation ends. The study of these expressions is not merely an academic exercise in vocabulary; it is an investigation into the "anatomy" of language itself. By examining the structural stability and fixedness of idioms, researchers can uncover how certain phrases become frozen in time, resisting the usual grammatical shifts that affect other parts of speech. Furthermore, the varying degrees of semantic opacity—ranging from transparent metaphors to entirely opaque historical relics—provide a window into the cognitive processes of how we categorize and store complex meanings. Ultimately, idioms serve a vital function in the social ecosystem of language. They allow speakers to convey dense emotional content, social commentary, and behavioral observations with a brevity and color that literal language often lacks. Because these expressions are so deeply rooted in cultural specificity, they function as markers of belonging, reflecting the unique heritage and collective memory of a speech community. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive review of these elements, analyzing the linguistic frameworks and functional roles that make idioms an essential, though often overlooked, organ in the body of human communication [14, p.260].

The initial challenge in the study of idiomaticity lies in establishing a precise definition that separates idioms from other forms of figurative language, such as metaphors or proverbs. While a metaphor might suggest a comparison, an idiom functions as a singular lexical unit. This "oneness" is best described through the lens of non-compositionality. In a standard sentence, the meaning is built piece by piece; however, in an idiom, the semantic link between the individual words and the final concept is severed. To understand an idiom is to move beyond the dictionary definitions of its constituents and instead access a specialized entry in the mental lexicon. This transition from literal to figurative meaning is not a binary switch but a spectrum,

where the degree of figurative “stretch” determines how easily a listener can decode the message without prior exposure [2, p.5777]. Integral to this nature is the concept of fixedness, or what linguists often call “lexicalization”. Unlike free phrases, idioms exhibit a high degree of structural stability that restricts grammatical manipulation. One cannot typically change the tense, number, or word order of an idiom without destroying its idiomatic status. For instance, if a phrase is “spilling the beans”, “changing it to”, “the legumes were shed” renders the idiom unrecognizable. This rigidity suggests that idioms are stored in the brain as “prefabs” or “formulaic sequences” which allows for faster processing during high-speed conversation but requires a higher cognitive load for language learners who must memorize them as unbreakable wholes [7, p.1076]. Beyond their internal mechanics, idioms are defined by their “semantic opacity”. This refers to the transparency of the idiom’s meaning-how much of the original literal image is still visible in the current figurative usage. Some expressions are “transparent”, “where the logic is still traceable, while others are “opaque” or “dark”, where the historical or cultural origin has been lost to time, leaving only the arbitrary connection between the words and their meaning. It is this specific combination of fixed structure and hidden meaning that allows idioms to act as cultural shorthand, packing complex social observations into stable, recognizable linguistic packages.

The concept of semantic opacity is perhaps the most significant hurdle for non-native speakers, as it represents the “distance” between the words used and the idea conveyed. In an opaque idiom, the literal meaning provides no clues to the figurative intent, making the expression a linguistic dead end for the uninitiated. For example, the phrase “to kick the bucket” (meaning to die) offers no logical connection between the physical act of kicking and the cessation of life. Conversely, a transparent idiom like “to see the light” (meaning to finally understand something) allows the listener to use the metaphor of light-as-knowledge to bridge the gap between literal and figurative meaning [10, p.91].

The structural stability of these expressions further reinforces their unique status. Because idioms are often processed as single units, they resist the standard rules of syntax that apply to free phrases. If a speaker says, “She really let the cat out of the bag”, the meaning of accidental disclosure is clear. However, if one attempts to use a passive construction like “The cat was let out of the bag by her”, the idiomatic force is significantly weakened, and the listener may momentarily search for an actual feline. This rigidity is what makes idioms “fixed expressions”; they are linguistic fossils that must be used in their exact form to retain their specific communicative power. Semantic Opacity (The “Opaque” Example): * Sentence: “I thought the exam would be difficult, but it was a piece of cake”.

Analysis: The words "piece" and "cake" do not inherently suggest "easiness." The meaning is entirely idiomatic and must be learned as a single concept [5, p.112].

*Cultural Specificity: * Sentence: "The manager told me to break a leg before I went on stage for the presentation."*

Analysis: This expression relies on the theatrical superstition that wishing someone "good luck" will actually cause bad luck. Without this cultural context, the sentence sounds like a threat of physical harm.

*Structural Stability: * Sentence: "We need to call it a day because everyone is exhausted."*

Analysis: You cannot "call it a night" or "call it a morning" to mean the same thing, nor

can you "call the day it." The phrase is syntactically frozen [1, p.270].

The classification of idioms allows us to see how they function as different parts of speech. Some idioms act as verbs, such as "to hit the hay" (to go to sleep), while others act as adjectives, like "under the weather" (feeling ill). By identifying these patterns, we can better understand how idioms integrate into the broader sentence structure. For instance, in the sentence "His explanation was a bit of a red herring," the nominal idiom "red herring" functions as a noun phrase to describe a distraction. These examples demonstrate that idioms are not just colorful additions to language; they are precise tools used to navigate complex social and emotional landscapes where literal words might feel too blunt or insufficient.

Idioms can be categorized by their grammatical composition, which dictates where they sit in a sentence.

Verbal Idioms: These function as verbs and usually describe an action or a change in state.

Example: "If we want to finish this project on time, we really need to get the ball rolling." [9, p.2077-2084].

Analysis: Here, "get the ball rolling" acts as the primary action (to start a process).

Nominal Idioms: These function as nouns or noun phrases, often identifying a specific type of person or thing.

Example: "He was always the black sheep of the family, choosing a path very different from his siblings."

Analysis: "Black sheep" serves as a noun complement to describe the subject's status.

Adjectival Idioms: These function as modifiers, providing a descriptive quality to a noun.

Example: "I wouldn't trust his advice; it seems a bit off the wall."

Analysis: "Off the wall" describes the "advice" as being unconventional or eccentric [11, p.771-776].

Classification by Meaning and Transparency

Beyond their grammar, idioms are categorized by how much of their meaning is "visible" to the listener. This is often referred to as the Transparency-Opacity Scale.

Transparent Idioms: The metaphorical link is clear and easy to deduce.

Example: "The soldiers were told to keep an eye on the horizon."

Analysis: The literal act of looking (eye) easily translates to the figurative act of monitoring.

Semi-Transparent Idioms: There is a metaphorical link, but it requires some cultural or situational context to grasp fully.

Example: "The detective decided to skate on thin ice by confronting the suspect without backup." [3, p.951-953]

Analysis: While the danger of "thin ice" is a clear metaphor for risk, the specific application to a professional situation requires a slight cognitive leap.

Opaque Idioms: The literal words offer no clue to the meaning, often due to lost historical origins.

Example: "Stop pulling my leg; I know you're joking!"

Analysis: There is no logical connection between tugging a limb and deception; the meaning must be memorized as a whole.

Functional Roles in Communication

Idioms of Emotion: Used to convey internal states more vividly than literal adjectives.

Example: "She was on cloud nine after receiving the scholarship."

Idioms of Behavior: Used to critique or describe how someone acts in a social setting.

Example: "He tends to bend over backwards to please his boss".

Idioms of Communication: Used to describe the nature of a conversation or a lack thereof.

Example: "We tried to discuss the budget, but we were just beating around the bush".

The final stage of this anatomical review focuses on the broader functions of idioms within the language system, specifically their role as indispensable tools for social and cognitive efficiency. While literal language provides the "bones" of communication, idioms provide the "spirit", allowing speakers to convey complex social evaluations and emotional nuances that would otherwise require lengthy explanations. This functional utility is most evident in the way idioms manage social harmony and politeness. For instance, using an idiom to criticize someone can often soften the blow of the critique, transforming a direct confrontation into a shared cultural observation. This demonstrates that idioms are not just linguistic decorations but are strategically deployed to navigate the delicate balance of human interaction. Furthermore, idioms play a vital role in cognitive economy [8, p.132-143]. By using a single "prefab" phrase, a speaker can trigger a vast network of shared meanings in the listener's mind instantly. This efficiency is why idiomatic language is so prevalent in high-pressure or fast-paced environments, such as sports, business, or emergency services, where the speed of information transfer is critical. When a team leader says they need to "cut to the chase," the team immediately understands the need for brevity and focus without the leader having to explain the merits of time management or the pitfalls of tangential discussion. Ultimately, the study of idioms leads to the conclusion that a language's health is reflected in its idiomatic richness. The continued creation and evolution of these expressions prove that language is a living organism, constantly adapting to new social realities and technological shifts. As new idioms enter the lexicon and older, more opaque ones fade into history, the cycle of idiomaticity continues to provide a bridge between the individual's thought and the community's collective experience. Understanding the anatomy of idioms—from their rigid structures to their fluid cultural functions—is therefore essential for anyone seeking not just to speak a language, but to truly inhabit it [12, p.1004-1022].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the anatomy of idioms reveals a sophisticated linguistic subsystem that transcends simple vocabulary. By moving beyond the literal sum of their parts, idiomatic expressions challenge our understanding of how meaning is constructed and stored in the human mind. The inherent tension between their structural stability and their semantic opacity creates a unique communicative tool—one that is rigid enough to remain recognizable over time, yet fluid enough to carry deep cultural resonance.

Ultimately, idioms are more than just "colorful language" or stylistic ornaments; they are essential cognitive shortcuts that facilitate nuanced social interaction. They allow for the expression of complex human experiences, from subtle emotions to behavioral critiques, within a framework that reinforces a sense of communal belonging. As this research has demonstrated, a thorough understanding of idiomaticity requires a multi-disciplinary perspective that accounts for grammar, semantics, and social context. Recognizing the vital role idioms play ensures a deeper appreciation for the living, breathing nature of language and its profound ability to

capture the intricacies of the human condition.

Relevance of the theme. Idioms are the most complex layer of the language. The relevance of this topic is about idioms are not just stylistic ornaments, but strategic tools that carry cultural codes and enhance communication speed. Comprehension these “illogical” expressions, especially in the process of artificial intelligence and language acquisition, is a priority for modern linguistics.

The scientific novelty. Idioms are analyzed as a complex “anatomy” in the article and introduces several innovative perspectives. For example, the theory of keeping them as a unified blocks in the mind is proposed. It systematizes meaning transition in the language through a scale of semantic transparency (from transparent to opaque). It substantiates the structural fixedness of idioms as a linguistic phenomenon.

Practical significance and application. The article presents a methodology for students to understand the logic and function of idioms instead of learning them by heart. It plays a vital role in choosing right equivalence in terms of the type of expression (nominal, verbal, adjectival). It shows how to use idioms in public relations and professional settings to mitigate criticism and convey ideas concisely as well.

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**The anatomy of idioms: a comprehensive review of linguistic structure,
semantics, and cultural function**

Summary

The anatomy of idioms reveals a complex intersection of linguistic structure, semantics, and cultural function, serving as a cornerstone of figurative language. At its core, an idiom is defined by its non-compositionality, meaning its overall significance cannot be derived simply by adding up the literal meanings of its individual components. This creates a distinct divide between literal and figurative interpretation, where the fixedness of the phrase prevents speakers from substituting synonyms without losing the intended message. Such structural stability is a hallmark of idiomaticity, ensuring that these expressions remain recognizable across generations of speakers. Central to the study of these expressions is the concept of semantic opacity, which describes the varying degrees to which the meaning of an idiom is hidden. Some idioms are relatively transparent, allowing for a logical leap from the literal to the figurative, while others are entirely opaque, appearing as linguistic puzzles to those outside the specific culture. This opacity is often the primary reason idioms cannot be translated word-for-word between languages; they are deeply rooted in cultural specificity, reflecting the unique history, social norms, and shared experiences of a particular speech community. Linguistically, idioms can be classified through several lenses, beginning with their grammatical structure. They may manifest as verbal phrases, nominal constructions, adjectival descriptions, or prepositional groupings. Beyond their form, they are categorized by their degree of transparency—ranging from semi-transparent to completely opaque—and by their communicative function. In practice, idioms are not merely decorative elements of speech; they perform vital roles in language by expressing complex emotions, describing specific behaviors, and facilitating nuanced social communication that literal language often fails to capture with the same economy or impact.

U.N.Məmmədova

**İdiomların anatomiyası: linqvistik struktur, semantika və mədəni funksiyanın
hərəkət icmalı
Xülasə**

İdiomların anatomiyası, məcazi dilin təməl daşı kimi xidmət edən linqvistik struktur, semantika və mədəni funksiyanın mürəkkəb kəşiməsini ortaya qoyur. Əsasən, bir fərdi onun qeyri-kompozitivliyi ilə müəyyən edilir, yəni onun ümumi əhəmiyyəti sadəcə fərdi komponentlərinin hərfi mənalarını toplamaqla əldə edilə bilməz. Bu, hərfi və məcazi təfsir arasında fərqli bir uçurum yaradır, burada ifadənin sabitliyi danışanların nəzərdə tutulan mesajı itirmədən sinonimləri əvəz etməsinin qarşısını alır. Belə struktur sabitliyi idiomatizmin əlamətidir və bu ifadələrin danışan nəsillər arasında tanınmasını təmin edir. Bu ifadələrin öyrənilməsində əsas məqam semantik qeyri-şəffaflıq anlayışıdır ki, bu da idiomların mənasının gizlədildiyi müxtəlif dərəcələri təsvir edir. Bəzi fərdlər nisbətən şəffafdır, hərfi mənadan məcazi mənaya məntiqi sıçrayışa imkan verir, digərləri isə tamamilə qeyri-şəffafdır və spesifik mədəniyyətdən kənarda olanlar üçün linqvistik tapmacalar kimi görünür. Bu qeyri-şəffaflıq, idiomların dillər arasında sözbəsöz tərcümə oluna bilməməsinin əsas səbəbidir; onlar mədəni spesifikliyə dərin kök salmış, müəyyən bir nitq icmasının unikal tarixini, sosial normalarını və ortaq təcrübələrini əks etdirir. Dilçilik baxımından, idiomlar qrammatik quruluşundan başlayaraq bir neçə prizmadan təsnif edilə bilər. Onlar şifahi ifadələr, isim konstruksiyaları, sifət təsvirləri və ya ön söz qruplaşmaları kimi təzahür edə bilərlər. Formalarından başqa, onlar şəffaflıq dərəcələrinə - yarı şəffafdən tamamilə qeyri-şəffaflığa qədər - və ünsiyyət funksiyalarına görə təsnif edilirlər. Praktikada, idiomlar sadəcə nitqin dekorativ elementləri deyil; onlar mürəkkəb emosiyaları ifadə etməklə, spesifik davranışları təsvir etməklə və hərfi dilin tez-tez eyni iqtisadiyyat və ya təsirlə ələ keçirə bilmədiyi incə sosial ünsiyyəti asanlaşdırmaqla dildə mühüm rol oynayır.

У.Н. Мамедова

**Анатомия идиом: комплексный обзор лингвистической структуры,
семантики и культурной функции
Резюме**

Анатомия идиом представляет собой сложное пересечение лингвистической структуры, семантики и культурной функции, выступая в качестве краеугольного камня образного языка. В своей основе идиома определяется свойством некомпозиционности, что означает невозможность выведения её общего значения путем простого суммирования буквальных смыслов её отдельных компонентов. Это создает отчетливый разрыв между буквальной и фигуральной интерпретацией, где фиксированность фразы препятствует замене синонимов без потери исходного смысла. Такая структурная стабильность является отличительной чертой идиоматичности, обеспечивающей узнаваемость этих выражений среди разных поколений носителей языка. Центральное место в изучении данных выражений занимает концепция семантической непрозрачности (окклюзии),

которая описывает различную степень скрытости значения идиомы. Некоторые идиомы относительно прозрачны, что позволяет совершить логический переход от буквального к образному значению, в то время как другие полностью непрозрачны и представляются лингвистическими загадками для лиц, не принадлежащих к данной культуре. Эта непрозрачность зачастую является основной причиной невозможности дословного перевода идиом; они глубоко укоренены в культурной специфике, отражая уникальную историю, социальные нормы и коллективный опыт конкретного языкового сообщества. С лингвистической точки зрения идиомы могут быть классифицированы по нескольким критериям, начиная с их грамматической структуры. Они могут проявляться в виде: глагольных фраз, номинативных конструкций, адъективных описаний, предложных групп.

Помимо формы, они классифицируются по степени прозрачности — от полупрозрачных до полностью непрозрачных — и по их коммуникативной функции. На практике идиомы не являются лишь декоративными элементами речи; они выполняют жизненно важные функции, выражая сложные эмоции, описывая специфические формы поведения и способствуя нюансированной социальной коммуникации, которую буквальный язык часто не способен передать с такой же экономией или воздействием.

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