



## IDIOMS AND CULTURE: EXPLORING THE INTER-INFLUENCE BETWEEN ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES

BH V N Lakshmi<sup>1</sup>, Abdullah Hamoud A. Al-Fauzan<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Qassim University, Buraidah, KSA, Saudi Arabia, <sup>2</sup>Department of Arabic Language, Qassim University, KSA, Saudi Arabia.  
Email: \*afozen@qu.edu.sa

Article History: Received on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019, Revised on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2019, Published on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2019

### *Abstract*

**Purpose of the study:** The aim of this paper is to study the interplay of multilingual idioms through source and time with a caveat that it is an endless pursuit.

**Methodology:** In this research, logical analysis and modeling are used.

**Results:** For the very reason that idioms are formed in a context, such learners and users must be very careful while using them. It is important for them to be well versed with the nuances and fine points of the foreign language before they venture into the use of idioms. Also, straightaway translating idioms from one's native language into a foreign language can truly lead to disastrous communication glitches.

**Applications of this study:** This research can be used for the universities, teachers, and students.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** In this research, the model of the Idioms and culture is presented in a comprehensive and complete manner.

**Keywords:** *Idioms, Culture, Religion, Literature, Communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

Myth, religion, culture, and language are inseparable. Most of the time people might believe that myth created culture and religion. But it is the language that first created myth that includes epics, dramas, and religious texts. Any myth is basically a story that has some good characters and some evil ones. In the passage of time people try to evolve the characteristics of good characters to live their lives in peace. In the course of time myth, religion and culture converge in the flow of language. In this convergence the language gets dressed up with new expressions and most of the time get standardized. Every region has its own idioms giving stress to the dialect of that area. Idioms are basically borrowed from the mythological stories and cultural practices and get embedded to announce its dialectical origins. As long as languages are confined to their territorial borders, there is no big problem with these dialectical expressions. But when humanity joined hands under the World Wide Web, languages started crisscrossing and sometimes the small dialectical borrowings short circuit the communication. So, it is essential for future generations to overcome this hurdle and clear the vision of understanding.

In the late 16th century British colonial education was imposed on Africa and Asia. Even though the British Empire used to encourage native education in the beginning, the moment they realized that their colonial subjects were becoming hostile, they immediately destroyed local education and imposed what we now call Macaulay's educational system. To subjugate their colonial subjects perpetually, education began to be imparted only through the English medium and children were forced to give up their mother tongue. Some cultures like India (which had many hundreds of indigenous languages) and even America (where Native American languages were spoken before the advent of the colonizers) effectively absorbed this onslaught. But most of the others are carried away by this invasion of linguistic culture. The colonial educational system distanced the subjugated speakers from their immediate reality and made them accept alien realities. Likewise, it also distanced their own thoughts from their mind and thus, it actively created headless bodies. Whatever it's past, English has become a wide banyan tree housing amongst its branches many races and religions. It has become the mother tongue of even the hardcore Islamic countries like Nigeria. The language has become global and modern technology puts them all in one frequency that they can easily tap and grasp, making the idea of universal brotherhood a reality. In this context, one should keep it in mind that the mother tongue of these people and their myth and culture has left an indelible mark on their creative thinking and verbal expressions [Boers, F., & Stengers, H. \(2008\)](#).

As a result of these historical vicissitudes English language newly acquired by the subjugated population metamorphosed and even sometimes transcended the native cultures and languages. Their colloquial idiom started drifting into the mainstream English language. Some of the non-native Englishers have become very difficult for native English speakers to understand. It is not only their pronunciation and expression that has troubled the English listener but also their local idiom that is dubbed into English. The metamorphosis is so complete that neither the English nor the subjugated, as in the case of the Africans, can accept that what they speak in English.

### METHODOLOGY

In this research, logical analysis and modeling are used.

## AFRICAN IDIOMS AND ENGLISH

[Farooq A. Kperogi \(2010\)](#) cites the example of the expression, shine your eyes which means “see the truth and not be fooled,” which is limited to West Africa. In Nigerian English the expression to take in means ‘to become pregnant’ but in standard varieties of English it means “to provide shelter to somebody.’ The expression, see or smell pepper which means ‘to get a shock’ is a direct translation from native Nigerian languages. In this regard, the legendary Chinua Achebe once said, “Any language that encroaches on the linguistic territory of other people should learn to come to terms with the inevitable reality that it would be domesticated.”

Inferring from a lecture on African heritage in the Caribbean by Professor Maureen Warner-Lewis, Pilgrim noted certain idioms that are exclusive to African heritage. It is interesting to know that West Africans use the idiom stick break in yuh ears to express stubbornness by using the notion of the ears being blocked. In their traditional society, if one is all alone, it signifies one’s madness or participation in the occult. So, such a situation is expressed as propping sorrow which signifies ‘cutting oneself off from one’s immediate environment.’ Also, when a person is suffering from an illness, they personify the sickness and say, could have me. Similarly, I’s people to is a phrase in Yoruba, used as a counterstatement when disrespected by someone which means they have treated them as less than a human, more like an animal. You stay there! is a West African phrase that gives the sense that ‘you’re fooling yourself.’

Languages get enriched from borrowings from other languages. But when the sound, word, and idiom fail to remain standard it proves to be a hurdle in communication. Historically, missionaries began to standardize English language of the non-natives, breaking them from their pagan practices and bringing them into the fold of Christianity to plant the faith not only in their religion but also, in their administration and education. This led to the enrichment of English as many idioms of different origins came into play in the modern English language [Cassagne, J. M. \(1995\)](#).

## INTERPLAY OF ENGLISH AND INDIAN IDIOMS

In India, too, many new expressions began to take shape given the long period of British rule. Whether the native English people use them or not, they remain vibrant in Indian English. C Paul Varghese aptly says:

“the Indian social, cultural and linguistic set up has affected the features of the English language as used by the Indian creative writers in English, especially the novelists, and ‘Indian English’ is only a variety of English whose characteristics stem from the life and culture of the people of India. And the Indianness of it consists in its cultural overtones and undertones and not in the legalization of the ignorant misuse of English”.

This is well exemplified in the writings of ‘Big Three’ figures in Indian fiction namely Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. In their writings Mulk Raj Anand is more a westerner, Raja Rao is more a native and R K Narayan takes a middle position. Raja Rao has notarized the English language to his suitability to express Indian ethos. All his characters use the language and idiom which corresponds to their social status. In his work *Kanthapura*, one can find direct translation of Indian regional proverbs and idioms. A few can be cited here: ‘No, you cannot straighten a dog’s tail’ is used in the sense of an ‘impossible task’. ‘They are not your uncle’s grandsons’; this sentence has been used to denote ‘not to take anything for granted.’ ‘So, you are a traitor to your salt-givers’, here traitor to your salt-givers means ‘hurting someone who had helped in the past.’ ‘Well, well, every squirrel will have his day’, this expression means ‘everyone will have his time.’ However, this has an equivalent expression in English as every dog has its day.

Coming to R K Narayan, the choice of idioms reflects his versatility in using the English language. Most of the idioms he used in his novels are familiar to both English and Indian Dictionaries of Idioms. For instance expressions such as breathe my last from *A Tiger for Malgudi* which means ‘to die’; out of earshot’ from the *Man-Eater of Malgudi* which means ‘too far away to hear somebody/something or to be heard’; nose-led by his wife from *The English Teacher* which means ‘dominate or control someone’; dying to return home from the *Dark Room* which means ‘eager to go home’ etc., all have their entries in English as well as Kannada (Indian local language) dictionaries [Cassagne, J. M. \(1995\)](#).

Later in modern times the diasporic writer, Salman Rushdie, appears to be very idiomatic with his exceptionally phraseological style. Critically analyzing this aspect in his work, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Grzegorz Szpila observes that Rushdie uses both microidioms and macroidioms. He explains microidioms as idiomatic expressions whose meanings are bound to the immediate semantic context in which they appear. A few examples from Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* are listed below:

“She was in high spirits,” they said, “and spoke in English, so we did not understand,” this means she was in a very cheerful mood and spoke in English and they didn’t understand.’

“William Methwold was out of his depth,” this means ‘William was unable to understand. It was beyond his understanding.’

“He’d got her goat, that was plain,” this means ‘he annoyed her very much and it is very clear.’

Macroidioms, on the other hand, are those idiomatic expressions that are used to refer to the semantics of a larger portion of a text. Grzegorz Szpila opines that in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* one can find numerous macroidioms referring to specific features of the characters as well as that describe their actions, habits, permanent states, recurring emotions and

similar. Thus, the expression a jack of all trades is used to describe the nature of a builder by name John Poe and the expression means 'a handy versatile person'; a serpent in the garden is used by the narrator to confess his own nature and the expression means 'a deceitful person'; the top banana is used to describe a person by name Yule Singh and the expression means 'the most important person; a night owl is used by the narrator to address the listeners of the radio and the expression means 'one who is habitually active at night.' All these expressions are inherently macroidiomatic.

## ENGLISH AND THE ARABIC IDIOMS

Similarly, emphasizing the influence of Arabic on other languages Habeeb Salloum says:

"Arabic, the language of the men from the desert, was one of the most important vehicles which carried the culture of the East to Europe. . . if today, we leaf through the English dictionaries, we will find that words of Arabic origin are found, here and there, under every letter of the alphabet. It may surprise many that a study made by some scholars of the Skeats Etymological Dictionary found that Arabic is the seventh on the list of languages that have contributed to the enrichment of the English vocabulary and idiom."

Undoubtedly, Arabic has charming and high skills to overcome time and place. It has this ability to reform itself under any condition; therefore, it has profoundly influenced traders, warriors, and orientalist and has transferred many of its elements such as idioms to other languages, including English.

Also, Arabic certainly qualifies as a rich language due to its intricacy and texts that occur in the nature of the languages itself. Idioms, proverbs, and the like are examples of that as they mostly express concrete opinions and can be very instructive such as "العصا والجزرة- شُفَع الوعد بالوعيد، ترغيب وترهيب في آن واحد" which means, a mixture of promises and threats to persuade someone to do something, especially to work harder. It is similar to the English idiom carrot and stick (emotional blackmail). In Arabic, one can also say "أتلج صدري"، "cool my breast /chest" meaning 'give comfort' or 'bring hope for good news.' As the Arabic language has many deep roots and has been enriching other languages as well as getting enriched by them [Antze, P. \(1992\)](#).

The fusion of Arabic and Western literature has been begun by scholars such as [Ameen Rihani, Khalil Gibran, etc.](#), whose writings add a religious dimension to language. Ameen Rihani's *The Book of Khalid* reflects his efforts to forge a new language that will serve as the vehicle of a new genre, the Arabized English novel. As Geoffrey Nash observes, Rihani's language in many of his works "is framed in a discourse clearly borrowed from the western Romantics, and at others in an idiom that reads like a literal translation from Arabic".

Rihani's influence is evident in Khalil Gibran's writings. He elevates now and then the mankind with phrase idioms, examples, symbols and spiritual sermon. The Prophet is spoken to by a mystical figure and his answers form a spiritual, philosophical view of life. In the poem *On Children* (1923), the Prophet says: "Your children are not your children / they are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself," though these words are English the idiom is undeniably Arabic.

In later times, Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, and others also have chosen to use English as a medium of creativity. Many of the Arabic words and phrases that are used in Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999) carry heavy socio-cultural implications that would have lost meaning if represented by English words or phrases. For instance, "You light the village," (نورت القرية)، "May your bounty be increased," (تسلم يدك)، "May your hands be saved," (عاش الاسم) etc. Moreover, there are numerous examples of idiomatic expressions in the novel that echo literal expressions from the structure of Egyptian Arabic. It may be noted here that Egyptian variations of the language usually follow a subject-verb-object order while in Modern Standard Arabic, the sentence structure is verb-subject-order. A few examples are listed below:

"The effendis outside refuse to put their minds in their heads and fear God. . . At first, he had thought she was trying to comfort herself by reading the Bible. But then she started writing. Writing! The daughter of the madwoman! Truly they must be made of different dough...." (p. 109)

"... ya Sett Amal, tell her to tell her government to lighten its hand on us a little" (p. 176)

(يا ست أمل قول لي لحكومتك تخف يدها علينا شوي)

"She's very intelligent," Tahiyya says. "But she's naughty like the Jinn." (هي مزعجة مثل الجنية) (p. 490)

"May God increase the good that comes from you!" (الله يزيد الخير منك) She smiles, catching the hand on her cheek, kissing it lightly." (p. 153)

Transferring expressions from Arabic, Soueif has created 'new English' that preserves Arab cultural identity. In this regard, [Albakry, M., & Hancock, P. H. \(2008\)](#) opine that Soueif is no different from the West African, Indian or Singaporean writers in English. She translates many of the standard Arabic and dialectal Egyptian formulas, metaphors, proverbs, and idioms literally into English. For example:

"Zeinab Hanim knows that (القرود في عين أمه غزال) the monkey in his mother's eyes, is a gazelle, but this is not a mother's fondness; the whole world would agree that her son is a fine man, a true man who fills his clothes" (Soueif, 1999, p.281).

This fusion of Arab thinking and English formulation is something unique of Soueif's literary style and comforts her bilingual readers to mentally hear the dialogues in Arabic. Talking of Egyptian Arabic, it has more vowels than Modern Standard Arabic: Four short and three long vowels exist in the former while the latter has only three short and three long vowels. Further, the Egyptian variety shows the influence of Coptic, the native language spoken in Egypt before the Arab invasion.

Speaking on a few surprising facts about the Arabic language, Faraan Sayed (2015) says that Arabic developed through a predominantly oral and poetic tradition that flourished in the Arabian Peninsula. Besides being culturally distant, there are many differences between Arabic and English. However, English has many words acquired either directly from Arabic or indirectly from Arabic words that have entered Romance languages before passing into English. Analyzing the semantic contrast of opaque idioms in Arabic and English, [Dr. Abdalla Elkheir Elgobshawi \(2018\)](#) observes certain interesting aspects. The first aspect is the Arabic idioms having equivalents in English. For instance, the idiomatic sense of استغشوا ثيابهم (istaghshaw thiyabahom), in the Quran is 'to show indifference.' It refers to a person who is presented with a message but who, instead of listening to it, wraps his garments around himself and takes off, thus showing indifference to what is being said. Its equivalent in English is to give someone the cold shoulder which means to behave in an unfriendly way towards someone. Another example is أسلم رجله للريح (aslām rijlayh lilriyh) which means 'to flee away quickly' or 'to run away.' Its English equivalent is run like the wind which means 'to escape quickly.'

The second aspect is English idioms having equivalents in Arabic. For instance, the English idiom cash on the hoof seems to originate from cattle industry. In order to get some quick cash, the animals can be sold at the owner's discretion to generate cash. The term was initially used for horses, but later, was generalized to indicate immediate payment in business deals. The Arabic counterpart of this idiom is النقد عند الحافرة (alnaqu and alhafirah) which idiomatically denotes that payment is to be made at the first word or immediately. Also, the English idiom a pig in a poke means 'to divulge a secret inadvertently.' Its Arabic equivalent is بعض السر لا يسر (yakhudhh ealaa hin ghira) which means 'some secrets should not be said already.' The semantic scope and the concept embedded in the Arabic idiom is much closer to the English one.

The third aspect is of idioms that exist in both English and Arabic languages but have culturally different senses. For example, the Arabic expression طوى كَتَشْحَهُ (tawa kashhu) and English idiom to turn/give a cold shoulder are equivalents. The two expressions use body parts. In Arabic, the phrase is used to refer to a person who feels hatred against someone. Thus, the gesture 'to turn away by one's ... waist' idiomatically indicates 'lack of intimacy.' In English, to give a cold shoulder has a quite different sense. In olden days, when guests are welcomed to a house, as a sign of hospitality they were served a hot meal but those who overstayed were served a cold shoulder (of meat). Since the shoulder is considered as the undesirable part of the animal, the serving used to convey the host's indifference towards the guests.

## CULTURE, MYTHOLOGY, AND EVOLUTION OF IDIOMS

In retrospect, one has to go through the evolution and progress of idioms to understand them in their right contemporary sense. The drifting of one or two idioms through the stream of mythical and historical times has made idioms start flooding into modern English language. No wonder, today the modern dictionary of idioms is as big as any other English dictionary. So, one must be very careful in using the idioms in their right context. In the following paragraphs, some idioms from different streams of thought are presented for a comprehensive vision of an advanced learner.

It is commonly agreed that culture is embedded in language and vice versa. All cultures create and tell stories, and myth-making is an important human creative activity. Myth is a part of the human subconscious and imagination. All psychologists and anthropologists agree that mythology lays profound foundations for ethical behavior and moral sensibilities in human beings. Freud, Jung, and Kent are unanimous in stating that myth plays a key role in shaping up human behavior and thinking even in modern times. Myths have imparted vital clues of our moral code through simple and pointed idiomatic expressions. That is the reason why epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata (Sanskrit), the Aeneid (Latin) and the Iliad (Greek) impress us with their clear and simple direction. These are found to be appealing to peoples of varied cultures even today, glorifying the nobility of human existence and preserving the roots of our culture and civilization. Their idiomatic language engages the readers' fascination for myth and mystery. So much so, that our vicissitudes in real life appear to echo those of the mythical characters. It is inevitable to bring mythical characters to manifest the present human world. Thus, when we come across an arduous task we usually address it as a Herculean task.

Example: The building of the Great Pyramids of Egypt must have been a Herculean task.

The idiom has its roots in Greek mythology. According to the legend, Heracles is the son of Zeus, king of the Greek gods, and a woman named Alcemene. As a child, Heracles shows his incredible strength by strangling snakes that are sent to kill him. But in his later life, he kills his wife and children under the spell of a curse. As a punishment, he is forced to accomplish the famous Twelve Labors which include the slaying of the nine-headed serpent Hydra. His heroic deeds gave way to the expressions Herculean task which refers to a near-impossible challenge and the hydra-head which connotes a problem or situation that has many facets or aspects. Heroes in the past are not merely admirable personalities; they sometimes even extend caution and warn us of certain vulnerabilities. The idiom Achilles' heel illustrates this. In the present competitive world, many young people are academically brilliant, but their progress is often hindered by their

weakness towards alcohol, gambling or racing. Certainly, any addiction is always one's Achilles' heel, a weakness or vulnerable factor.

Example: John is a prosperous businessman, but gambling is his Achilles' heel.

The idiom relates to the story of Achilles, not to recount his heroic deeds but his weak point that proves fatal for him. According to the Greek legend, Achilles is dipped into the river Styx by his mother Thetis to make him invulnerable. The only portion of his body not immersed into the water is his heels, by which his mother holds him. As a result, the heels are the only vulnerable part of his body. He is later killed by an arrow that strikes his heel. Though the legend is ancient, the phrase did not come to be used in English until the 19th century.

Mythical anecdotes even tell about fate, fortune, and destiny. Sometimes with passing of time they change colors and might convey a different sense. Midas touch is one such story. At one time it was the story of greed, but today, it has a more positive connotation. Midas was a legendary king of Phrygia (present Turkey). In return for a good deed, he requests the god Dionysus to grant a wish that can turn everything he touches into gold. But when he discovers to his horror that his touch turns his food and drink and even his daughter to gold, he begs Dionysus to take back the gift. The greed of Midas in the story gradually went out of focus. Now the idiom Midas touch speaks about the ability to gain success or financial reward from one's actions.

Example: Bill Gates had the Midas touch. He started his business out of his garage and in a year he was a millionaire.

Folk tales and fables are not mere pastimes; they also impart values and ethos to society impacting the young and the aged alike. In *The Arabian Nights*, 'open sesame' is a magical phrase used to open a robbers' den and today the idiom open sesame is used for something that helps one to achieve a goal or access an opportunity.

Example: Good grades in high school will be an open sesame to any college you choose.

Also, the idioms a thousand and one which signifies a large number and an Aladdin's cave which means a place full of valuable or interesting objects are from the *Arabian Nights*.

[Aesop's fables \(2002\)](#) are popular as children's stories, but they were originally intended for adults as cautionary tales about politics and societal ills. Many of the morals they convey have become everyday idioms today. The idiom look before you leap is a warning that one should never act rashly but should first consider all the possible outcomes and consequences. It comes from the fable *The Fox and the Goat* in which a fox trapped in a well, manages to coax a goat into leaping down there with him. The most common idiom birds of a feather flock together that refers to people who have similar interests, ideas or characteristics tend to associate with one another is from the fable *The Farmer and the Stork*.

Example: I knew you and John would get along well, you're birds of a feather, after all.

Also, the idiom out of the frying pan into the fire from *The Stag and the Lion* that describes going from a bad or dangerous situation into one that is even worse; a bird in hand is worth two in a bush from *The Hawk and the Nightingale* suggests that it is better to have something less valuable than to pursue something more valuable that may not be able to be obtained; slow and steady wins the race from *The Tortoise and the Hare* conveys that consistent, effective effort leads to success. The list goes endless since many idioms from the fables have entered the mainstream communication.

Language, arts, oral and literary traditions express how people order their experience and the universe, set standards of behavior, shape and reflect cultural values. Moving towards the concept of a global village, the word 'foreign' gets diminished and diversity gets welcomed. Quite interestingly, idioms, as a linguistic tool, are one of the important means promoting connectivity among peoples of different nations, languages, cultures, traditions, customs, and histories. For instance, the idiom cat got your tongue is used to describe when someone is at a loss of words or being unusually quiet.

Example: Seeing his son who sat silently holding a memo from his school, the father shouted:

'Don't just sit there like the cat's got your tongue! Say something!'

This expression comes from one of the practices in medieval times according to which liars and blasphemers are punished by cutting their tongues and feeding to cats. In ancient Egypt, cats are worshipped as gods and giving the tongue of a liar is considered as an offering to the gods. Thus, this ancient Egyptian cultural practice has survived in the English language in the form of an idiom.

A few other idioms also illustrate the bridging of the cultures of the east and the west. In ancient India, it is a common practice in temples to pour butterballs of ghee over the statues of the gods while praying for forgiveness and seeking favors. This practice exists even to date. Also, in Tibet, there is a tradition dating back to the Tang Dynasty in which the sculptures are created from butter for the New Year with the belief that such offerings will bring peace and happiness during the full lunar year. This survived in English language as idiom butter someone up which means 'to praise or flatter someone excessively.'

Example: Simon was always buttering up the boss, so he was surprised when he failed to get a promotion.

Another idiom a Mecca for someone/something immediately puts into one's mind the holy place Mecca in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Muslims from all corners of the world visit the holy place. Hence, if a place is a Mecca for someone/something, it is a place that a lot of people visit because it is known for something that they want to see or do.

Example: Silicon Valley is a Mecca for electronics.

## RELIGION AND IDIOMS

Religion is not only omnipresent but also a powerful and dynamic force in the human world. Different religions have different ways of worshipping the supernatural such as prayer, song, dance, offerings, sacrifices, etc., through which people seek blessings, protection, and prosperity. In this regard, the religious texts act as panacea to all human afflictions and offer standards for better life. The idiomatic expressions in these texts encapsulate the essence of prosperity and impact human society. For example, the expression 'neither root nor branch' is used by the Prophet Malachi in The Book of Malachi. He writes:

'For, behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.'

The Lord is declaring in this idiom that the wicked will not have an inheritance nor will they have a posterity to whom they could pass anything.

Preaching wisdom to mortals, one of the legends in Islam says, 'if the mountain will not come to Mohammed, Mohammed will go to the mountain.' The background story is that once Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) is asked to provide proof of his teaching, so he orders Mount Safa to come to him. When the mountain doesn't move, Mohammed praises God for being merciful saying that if the mountain has obeyed his command it might have fallen on all of them and destroyed them. Therefore, he will now go to the mountain. He thanks God for having mercy on such a disbelieving people. From then onwards the expression if the mountain will not come to Mohammed, Mohammed will go to the mountain means 'if things aren't going your way, you'll have to adjust to the way they are.' In English, the expression has been used by Francis Bacon in his Essay On Boldness.

### New Englishes, translations and Idioms

With England ruling more than half the globe at one time, the adoption of English as the local language was unavoidable. However, linguistic habits formed over millennia could not be done away with overnight. Resultantly, new Englishes emerged in the countries that were under the British dominion. Platt et al. (1984) have given numerous examples of the development of idioms in several new Englishes. A few to be listed are -- expressions combining elements from English with indigenous forms, e.g., Nigerian English to put sand in someone's gari ('gari' is a type of flour) which means 'to threaten someone's livelihood; loan translations of idioms from indigenous languages. e.g., to shake legs means 'to be idle.' It is used in Singaporean and Malaysian English as a translation of the Malay idiom 'goyang kaki;' the blending of two existing idioms hiving way to a new idiom, e.g., to be in hot water blends with to be in a soup giving way to a new idiom, in Singaporean English, to be in hot soup which means 'to be in trouble.' Also, there are expressions that seem to be genuinely 'idiomatic', i.e., entirely innovative forms such as the East African idiom to be on the tarmac which means 'to be in the process of seeking a new job' (pp. 107-110).

Some popular expressions in English are direct, unidiomatic translations from several languages. Linguists address them as "calques" or loan translations. According to the observations of Farooq [Kperogi \(2015\)](#) these calques, which are sometimes ungrammatical, have become part of the natural rhythm of the English language yet the ungrammaticality of the expressions goes unnoticed by the native speakers. The expressions like having a look-see, a long time no see, no-go area, etc., from Chinese language are ungrammatical by the conventions of English grammar but now have become idiomatic in English. Similarly, the English idiomatic expression straw that broke the camel's back which stands for the limit of one's patience is a direct translation from Arabic. The original phrase in Arabic is القشة التي قصمت ظهر البعير (alqassha alati qassamat dhahra al baer), which literally means 'the straw that broke the back of the camel.' Also, the idiom stop climbing on my head which means 'stop annoying me' is of Arabic origin ([Flanagin, 2015](#)).

Kperogi observes that the phrase in a nutshell which means "in a few words" isn't original to English, it is a direct translation from Latin. According to The Random House Dictionary, the expression had been attested in the English language between 1175 and 1225. When we say that something goes without saying, we mean it's obvious. It's a direct translation of the French expression 'celava sans dire'. The expression to badmouth somebody which means to engage in ill-natured talk about them behind their back has its origins in Africa. It's a direct translation from the Mandingo dà n yàmà and has come into mainstream English via African American Vernacular English.

In modern times, the tag line 'bad language makes good advertisement' is gaining popularity giving way to a wider scope to certain expressions. Thus, mispronunciations in spoken language started creating distortions in idiomatic expressions, increasing perplexity further. In this regard [Donyale Harrison \(2018\)](#) gives a few interesting examples such as you've got another think coming, meaning 'you should think again' is uttered as you've got another thing coming, which doesn't make a lot of sense; be on tenterhooks is an obvious saying about a state of uneasy suspense or painful anxiety but usually people mispronounce it as 'tenderhooks' unaware of the fact that tenterhooks are hooks used to stretch woolen clothes;

similarly a damp squib, a small explosive that will not fire is used to depict 'a disappointing person' now is commonly used as a damp squid, ignoring the fact that squid is a sea animal. Apart from mispronunciation, confusion also comes into play in the progression in the meanings of idioms from the past to the present. For instance, the idiom on his high horse is originally meant 'one in command' but with passing of time it has come to mean 'someone snobbish or superior.'

Example: My uncle is on his high horse, bossing people around.

### CLASSIFICATION AND VARIATIONS

After making a brief yet comprehensive attempt to understand idioms it is clear that there is an abundance of idioms in the English language, and most of us might have likely said, heard, or read at least one idiom or idiomatic expression. At the same time there are many who still struggle with learning and understanding these little gems of culture and creativity. So, to facilitate better understanding of idioms it is essential to focus on the classification and variation. In the past, idioms have been studied based on their form, but with the emergence of functional approach to the study of language, it shifted from idiom structures to idiom meanings.

Since idioms are not alike either in form or sense. Mantyla notes that researchers usually distinguish three groups of idioms based on the degree of figurativeness. Figurative or opaque idioms are the first group. In this type, there is no connection between the meaning of individual words and the meaning of the whole idiom. Hence, it is impossible to understand the figurative meaning of an opaque idiom if one is not familiar with its etymology. For example, white elephant means an expensive but useless thing; kick the bucket means to die; hot potato means a controversial issue that is unpleasant to deal with. The second group is semitransparent idioms. Here some of the words in the idiom are used in their literal sense and it becomes a clue to decipher the figurative meaning of the expressions. For example, lie through one's teeth means to tell an outright lie without remorse; promise somebody the moon means to promise someone that one will do something great or wonderful even though it is not possible; shake/quake in your shoes means to tremble with fear. The third group is transparent idioms. In these idioms one can see a clear connection between the literal and the figurative sense, so the expressions are almost self-explanatory. For example, lend your hand means to give assistance to someone; give the green light means grant someone permission to proceed with some action and hit the nail on the head means to do exactly the right thing.

With this basic classification of idioms in mind, let us shed light on the aspect of variation. Even though idioms are traditionally considered as fixed multi-word expressions, several of them have undergone a variety of certain constituents without a change in meaning. Variation can be either lexical or syntactic, says Moon. According to him, lexical variation implies that a constituent in an idiom can be substituted for another, but the meaning of the expression remains the same. For example, a can of worms and a bag of worms both mean a situation or subject that is very complicated or unpleasant to deal with; also, have butterflies in your stomach and get butterflies in your stomach both mean to have a feeling of nervousness before doing something. An interesting observation made by Moon is that the lexical variation in idioms often concerns different usage in British and American English. For instance, overconfident in one's importance, skill or authority is conveyed using the expression too big for one's boots in British English and too big for one's breeches/britches in American English.

Coming to morphological or syntactic variation, it involves differences in number or possession. This may occur when there is a change in word order, tenses and when a word is included or excluded from the idiom. It is quite interesting to observe that sometimes idiom variation causes a clear change in meaning. This may create opposite idioms such as have a monkey on your back which means a persistent problem or burden and the opposite sense i.e. 'to remove or solve a problem that has been difficult to get rid of' is conveyed by getting the monkey off your back. Idiom variation also creates idiom synonyms such as wash/air your dirty laundry/ linen in public and do your washing in public both mean 'to discuss very privately, personal matters, especially that which may be embarrassing, in public or with other people.' This clearly shows that there is a possibility for idioms to get modified intentionally for various purposes and in different contexts. However, one should not ignore the caveat that deviation from the conventional form of an idiom is likely to result in a linguistic error. Therefore, instead of modifying idioms deliberately, it is always better to enjoy playing with them, using them in different contexts. This exercise eventually catalyzes mastering of idioms and fine-tuning of one's wit and wisdom.

### CONCLUSIONS

Not one source, not one book or any number of research papers can sum up the story of idioms. They are not only populating the language through newspapers, television shows, the internet and through literature and pulp fiction but also, continuously coloring it. This statement is especially meaningful for learners and users of other languages. For the very reason that idioms are formed in a context, such learners and users must be very careful while using them. It is important for them to be well versed with the nuances and fine points of the foreign language before they venture into the use of idioms. Also, straightaway translating idioms from one's native language into foreign language can truly lead to disastrous communication glitches. Teachers and trainers of such courses must also be wary to familiarize their students with idioms suitable to the foreign language use and aid in their acculturation to help them place their language in the right context. The

study of idioms, or of language for that matter, should be an unhurried and relaxed exercise. It should be undertaken only by those who aim to master a communication medium more than a graded subject or a language.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We sincerely thank the Deanship of Scientific Research, Qassim University for accepting and sponsoring the Interdisciplinary project on the Interplay of Multilingual Idioms with all required assistance. We thank the Department of English and the Department of Arabic Language for their constant support at every progressive step of our research. We remain thankful to all our colleagues for their valuable suggestions and insight that greatly enhanced the scope of our research ideas.

## REFERENCES

1. Aesop's fables. OUP Oxford, 2002.
2. Albakry, M., & Hancock, P. H. (2008). Code switching in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*. *Language and Literature*, 17(3), pp. 221-234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947008092502>
3. Elgobshawi, A. E. (2018). Opaque Idioms in Arabic and English: A Perspective Analysis of their Semantic Anomaly. (Pp 37-46). *Journal for the Study of English Linguistics*. 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.5296/jsel.v6i1.13207>
4. Flanagan, Jake. (2015, May 15). The Best Idioms Around the World, Ranked. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/402739/the-best-idioms-from-around-the-world-ranked/>
5. Gibran, Khalil. (1923). *On Children*. The Prophet. Retrieved June 15, 2018, from
6. Harrison Donyale. (2018). *How to Crack the Code of Popular Expressions*. Reader's Digest. Retrieved from
7. Kperogi, Farooqi A. (2010, June 20). Top Cute and Strangest Nigerian English Idioms. Retrieved from <https://www.farooqkperogi.com/2010/06/top-cutest-and-strangest-nigerian.html>
8. Kperogi, Farooqi A. (2015, April 19). Popular expressions English borrowed from other languages. Retrieved from <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/sunday/index.php/politics-of-grammar/20412-popular-expressions-english-borrowed-from-other-languages>
9. Boers, F., Demecheleer, M., & Eyckmans, J. (2004). Cross-cultural variation as a variable in comprehending and remembering figurative idioms. *European Journal of English Studies*, 8(3), 375-388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1382557042000277449>
10. Skandera, P. (Ed.). (2008). *Phraseology and culture in English* (Vol. 54). Walter de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110197860>
11. Corten, I. H. (1992). *Vocabulary of Soviet society and culture: a selected guide to Russian words, idioms, and expressions of the post-Stalin era, 1953-1991*. Duke University Press.
12. Nichter, M. (2010). Idioms of distress revisited. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 34(2), 401-416. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-010-9179-6>
13. Yağiz, O., & Izadpanah, S. (2013). Language, Culture, Idioms, and Their Relationship with the Foreign Language. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 4(5). <https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.4.5.953-957>
14. Adelnia, A., & Dastjerdi, H. V. (2011). Translation of idioms: a hard task for the translator. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 1(7), 879-883. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.1.7.879-883>
15. Li, Y., & Xiaoling, H. (2004). On Psychological Differences in National Culture and the English and Chinese Numerical Idioms [J]. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 9.
16. Hinton, D. E., & Lewis-Fernández, R. (2010). Idioms of distress among trauma survivors: subtypes and clinical utility. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 34(2), 209-218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-010-9175-x>
17. Antze, P. (1992). Possession trance and multiple personality: psychiatric disorders or idioms of distress?. *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review*, 29(4), 319-323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136346159202900404>
18. Boers, F., & Stengers, H. (2008). A quantitative comparison of the English and Spanish repertoires of figurative idioms. *APPLICATIONS OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS*, 6, 355. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110199161.3.355>
19. Sabban, A. (2008). Critical observations on the culture-boundness of phraseology. *Phraseology: An interdisciplinary perspective*, 229-241. <https://doi.org/10.1075/z.139.21sab>
20. Gibbs Jr, R. W. (2007). Idioms and formulaic language. In *The Oxford handbook of cognitive linguistics*.
21. Mezzich, J. E., Kirmayer, L. J., Kleinman, A., Fabrega Jr, H., Parron, D. L., Good, B. J., ... & Manson, S. M. (1999). The place of culture in DSM-IV. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 187(8), 457-464. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00005053-199908000-00001>
22. Cassagne, J. M. (1995). *101 French idioms: Understanding French language and culture through popular phrases*. Passport Books.