Cultural Identities Mirrored through
English Idioms and Proverbs

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Abstract

Generally speaking, we may view language as a cultural product with specific semantic references. Therefore, when dealing with such a complex phenomenon, we need to determine first, the way in which culture and language interact. If, by learning a foreign language, we get into contact with the cultural identity of a specific nation, then culture becomes its reference point and language turns into an indispensable tool which facilitates our understanding of the culture itself. If we assume this idea, then culture becomes a product of the human interaction. This close relationship between language and culture manifests into conventionalized language, especially in idiomatic expressions which beautifully reflect cultural significance.

The scope of this study is not only to establish the way in which language and culture blend but also to explore the British cultural background by analysing, from a cognitive linguistic point of view, relevant metaphoric expressions found in idiomatic expressions and proverbs that speak about the identity of a nation.

Keywords: *cultural identity, metaphor, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, idiomatic expressions, proverbs*

1. Introduction

Idioms and proverbs open the door to a new way of perceiving the world. The beauty of these lexical items lies in their symbolism and metaphoricity. Given their rigid structure, idioms may be viewed as difficult but, in reality, their deciphering becomes a pleasant challenge for any English learner. Proverbs, contrary to idioms, are more

spontaneous and, given the sum of their constituents which facilitates their understanding, they prove to be easier to understand. During the process of learning acquisition, the English learner shall be fascinated to discover that lexical items allow for a cross-cultural communication. These lexical structures surely reflect the influence of society upon language. The pervasiveness of idioms in everyday vocabulary turns them into important tools of communication which reflect a particular way of thinking, behaving and conceptualizing the reality we live in. Thus, language becomes a manifestation of culture.

The aim of the present research is to prove the conceptual nature of idioms which yield a system of metaphors closely related to our experience and to explore cultural identity by analysing idioms and proverbs. The choice for the cognitive approach has been dictated by its important relativist role in the process of meaning interpretation. For the theoretical aspects discussed in the present paper, specific examples of idioms (Flavell & Flavell 1994, Siefring 2004) and proverbs (Vas 1998, Manser 2007) have been selected from a series of dictionaries mentioned in the bibliography at the end of the paper.

2. Idioms as an Expression of Cultural Identity

Idioms are commonly used in all languages given their colourful and dynamic effect on language. By yielding a system of metaphors closely related to our experience, idioms also provide interesting insights into the use of words and thought processes. An idiom is actually "a form of expression, construction, phrase, a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage, and often having a meaning other than its grammatical or logical one" (Bonta 2008: 28). Even though they are very ambiguous sometimes, they can play the role of a part of speech and thus, manage to establish relations with the context. Although a foreign language learner may view idioms as ambiguous terms, they are, first of all, a particular manner of expressing something specific in language. Secondly, they are conventionalized phrases where the meaning of the whole phrase is different from the meaning which might be produced by interpreting

the individual words in the phrase. Their meaning can be considered unpredictable since the speaker might feel that it hides secrets from him.

Translating idioms is not an easy task for non-native speakers; in fact, in many cases they cannot be translated at all, depending on the language. Some of them have equivalents in the target language, but sometimes a precise translation is impossible. In fact, non-native speakers cannot derive their meaning by combining the literal meanings of the individual words in each phrase although most idioms have a literal interpretation along with their idiomatic ones. Their ambiguity derives from the possibility of interpreting them either idiomatically (figuratively) or literally, and from their context-dependant nature. "The fact that some idioms are at least partly compositional tends to be obscured, because the compositional aspects of the figurative meanings conveyed by idioms are often metaphorical in nature." (Hurford et al 2007: 329) Where there is no awareness that an idiomatic expression is a metaphor, an interpreter may give a literal version of it, creating a completely different meaning. In Kövecses' (2002: 201–202) opinion, conceptual motivation facilitates the understanding of idioms. The linguist uses the word motivation for semantic transparency. He considers that, by figuring out the meaning of an idiom, we establish a link between the idiomatic meaning and the literal one, while the transparency or motivation of idioms arises from the knowledge of the cognitive mechanisms and these link idiomatic meanings to the literal ones. Understanding idioms this way, speakers are able to use the source domain in order to interpret the target domain as in the case of metaphors. A source[1] domain is central and fundamental to our everyday experience and represents the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions. The conceptual domain that we try to understand corresponds to the target domain. Metaphorical connections arise from the perception of

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[1] The terms *source* and *target* were introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).

correlations between different domains such as love, life, learning, understanding, temperament, etc., domains derived from our physical experiences; this way it is easier to make new associations and attribute new structures or properties to objects, concepts and situations. All these can be achieved by mapping the source domain onto the target domain. In other words, there is a set of correspondences which can be found between the source and the target domain. This proves that, where translation fails, Cognitive Linguistics helps interpreters explore the descriptive and explanatory potential of language. This is possible because the meanings of idioms are usually metaphorical; and, as cognitive instruments, metaphors offer new insights into the language exactly as idioms do. The difference between metaphors and idioms lies in the fact that metaphors require cultural knowledge and a context in order to have meaning, while idioms have a valid meaning given their metaphorical value. When dealing with idiomatic expressions we, as interpreters, perceive the metaphoric nature of the items even if metaphors are conventional but, at the same time, we may automatically interpret their literal meaning. Unlike idioms, metaphors cannot be translated literally, and draw their image from different aspects of life. Both idioms and metaphors enlarge meaning and facilitate understanding.

The following examples are specific to English but may also have similar counterparts in other languages. When a person *feels a bit under* weather, he wants to say that he is not feeling well, or that he might catch a cold. In other circumstances *bad weather and feeling under the weather won't deter somebody from a prize* or, perhaps, a problem would turn out to be a *piece of cake.* When a statement is not taken seriously we may use the idiomatic expression *take with a grain of salt* but when we say that *curiosity killed the cat* it means that being inquisitive can lead to unpleasant situations. *Barking up the wrong tree* allures to accusing the wrong person, *beat around the bush* makes reference to avoiding the main topic in a specific situation. *Blessing in disguise* is used to refer to something that is not recognized as a good thing from the very beginning. When we *burn the midnight oil* we stay

up late and work, but when people *hear/learn it on the grapevine* they want to emphasize the rumours they hear about somebody. *Killing two birds with one stone* is used to refer to accomplishing two different things at the same time, whilst *the taste of your own medicine* makes reference to an experience of the same harmful or unpleasant thing that one has inflicted on others.

A literal translation for the examples stated above could lead to obscure literalism but, thinking of the metaphors the idiomatic expressions contain, we notice that even if a metaphor relies on the literal use of a word, it does it only for the purpose of indicating that the speaker wants to communicate something other than the literal meaning. In time, some of the idioms may lose their metaphorical value and become frozen. Their old metaphorical meaning becomes the new literal one, and the similarities, upon which the dead metaphor were once based, may still be perceived today, but this is up to the speaker's choice.

Idioms do fit metaphors and are part of the normal everyday way of talking. They are conventionalized phrases, where the meaning of the whole phrase differs from the meaning which might be produced by interpreting the individual words in the phrase. They reflect a system of coherent ideas and cognitive constructs due to the fact that our conceptual system is grounded in our experience.

According to traditional views, idioms are special sets of a larger category which, if assumed as matters of language alone, they may be taken as items of the lexicon which are independent of any conceptual system. Dealing with the subject of idioms, Zoltán Kövecses (2002: 199–200) brings arguments in favour of the opposite view, and regards the majority of idioms as products of our conceptual system and not as simple matters of language. Their overall meaning cannot be derived from the sum of the parts but from our general knowledge of the world embodied in our conceptual system.

It is the cognitive mechanism that links domains of knowledge to idiomatic meanings. What the cognitive view does, in fact, is to simplify things. The place of metaphor "is not in the language at all,

but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. The general theory of metaphor is given by characterizing such cross-domain mappings." (Lakoff in Ortony 1993: 203) Contemporary research reveals the fact that the metaphorical expression refers to a linguistic expression that is the surface realization of the cross-domain mapping. This cross-domain mapping is grounded in the body and everyday experience and, because of this, some mappings tend to be universal, while others remain culture specific. Abstract concepts are usually structured through the metaphorical mapping of information from a familiar source domain onto a less familiar target domain. For example, when people speak about their feelings and emotions such as love, anger, hatred, they frequently conceptualize such concepts in terms of other concepts, based on their knowledge. Love, for example, may be conceptualized in terms of objects, animals, journeys, unity, etc. From a conceptual point of view, LOVE IS AN OBJECT/AN ANIMAL/A JOURNEY/UNITY/A DREAM/A PHYSICAL FORCE/WAR. Illustrative for this category are the examples stated bellow. *Match made in heaven* is used as a reference to a happy relationship; *poppy love* is informally used to describe feelings of romantic or platonic love. When saying that somebody *has the hots*, the person in question is strongly attracted to someone, but when a man and a woman are *an item* they form a unity, they make a couple or, when a *match is made in heaven*, the relationship is great. People called *lovey-dovey* express their love in public, while people whose relationship *is on the rocks* experience difficulties. When somebody cheats on his/her partner we call the person a *love rat*, but when people want to commit to a relationship, from a legal point of view, they first *pop the question*, and then they *tie the knot*. These examples demonstrate that metaphorical thinking induces a similarity that we perceive through our experience, allowing us to conceptualize our emotions in more sharply defined terms.

Narrower uses restrict the term idiom to a particular kind of unit: one that is fixed and semantically opaque or metaphorical. Such

units are sometimes called pure idioms. As some of the idioms are more or less transparent and others completely opaque, the general tendency is to interpret their idiomatic meaning without thinking about the metaphors they contain. The class of linguistic expressions called idioms comprises metaphors (e.g., *spill the beans*), metonymies (e.g., *earn one's bread and butter*), pairs of words (e.g., *salt and pepper*), similes (e.g., *as easy as pie*), sayings (e.g., *the belly rules the mind*), and so on.

When considering idioms from a metaphorical point of view, it is easier to make sense of their idiomatic meanings and to have mental images based on their metaphors. The word *appetite* which is usually associated with a desire for food may also be used to refer to something other than food, as in *appetite for culture/ knowledge/ work*, where the meaning is craving for knowledge. In the same way, *whet your appetite* can be used to mean awaken a desire. Nevertheless, idioms are pervasively used in human interaction and transmit messages about the speakers' thoughts and emotions, about their customs and social conventions and about their cultural beliefs.

Idioms deriving from specific domains are difficult to translate and thus mislead their users because the domains they belong to differ across cultures. In an example such as "my car is a *lemon*", a certain aspect of a more complex and abstract area of knowledge implies what we generally know about cars. This is explicitly emphasized by the metaphorical expression which linguistically links a more abstract target domain of knowledge (that of cars) to a more particularized familiar concrete source domain in order to specify the details of a defective product. The expression makes reference to a bad deal, a car of the lowest value, a 'clunk'. To conceptualize a car as if being a lemon is literally anomalous; still, as a metaphor it became standardized and expresses negative judgements.

The connotative meaning of *lemon* has undergone a series of historical changes[2]. "My car is a *peach*" may be considered the opposite of this idiomatic expression, while "my car is a *pear*" or "my car is an *apple*" cannot be uttered without causing anomaly. From a cognitive point of view, we have exemplified a conceptual metaphor of the type THE CAR IS FOOD (A PIECE OF FRUIT) which, as Lakoff argues, is "marginal to our culture and our language", consisting of "only one conventionally fixed expression of the language." (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 54) Such examples are isolated and unsystematic and do not interact with other metaphoric concepts. Although idiomatic expressions take on a life of their own, some idioms, especially those that reflect metaphorical relationships, have become fixed over time. On the whole, language is filled with numerous examples of metaphorical expressions which reflect large-scale metaphorical systems.

English people frequently use parts of the body as tools in transferring the meaning from the human body and from the human senses and passions to inanimate objects or vice versa. Illustrative examples of such idioms are: *a cauliflower ear* (as a reference to a disfigured ear), *a human pretzel* (a contortionist), *the apple of one's eye* (a very dear person), *apple-cheeked* (having red coloured cheeks), *butterfingered* (a clumsy person), *butter head* (with an ugly head), *cinnamon-head* (a feeble-minded person), *egghead* (a bald intellectual), *ham handed* (lacking social grace or tact), *lard bucket* (a fat person), *lard head* (stupid person), *to go belly up* (to go bankrupt), etc. These examples bare figurative meanings as they link the physical domain of knowledge with the idiomatic meaning of such idioms. They prove the complex relationship that exists between language, conceptualization, the human body, and the cultural context. Parts of the body may also be used as containers since their emotions may be viewed as

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[2]In mid 19th century Britain, it metaphorically generated a person with "a *tart* inclination," then, *lemon* came to be associated with "a *gullible* person." (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com)

substances in the body containers. Thus, people often speak of *brain food* or *food for thought*, where the brain is seen as the container for fruitful ideas. The body part which has been selected as a vehicle entity is conventionally associated with a particular skill, activity, function, or interest factor of the person. The target entity in this case may be the skill, activity, function, or interest rather than the person.

Another class of idioms frequently used in everyday speech is represented by animal idioms which transfer animal attributes to human beings. Examples include: *calf love* (inexperienced love), *cash cow* (as a reference to a wealthy person), *being a cuckoo in the nest* (as a reference to a bad person), *being dog tired* (to be extremely tired), *to get someone's goat* (to irritate someone deeply), *go to the dogs* (to become disordered), *hold one's horses* (to wait and be patient), *holly cow* (used to express strong feelings), *horse sense* (as a reference to common sense), *a paper tiger* (used as a reference to a person who has a lot of power), *old duck* (as a reference to an eccentric person), etc. All these examples are culture specific and provide a fascinating glimpse into linguistics describing certain situations or attributing new traits to certain people. These examples may also be interpreted through the conceptual metaphor: PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS in which animal behaviour is attributed to humans or human behaviour.

Speakers of different cultures and languages use completely different expressions to portray similar meanings; each set of collocations and words can be easily understood by native speakers. Differences in religion, ideologies, social classes, education or even geographical locations may lead to changes in language. Many examples illustrate cultural, historical and asocial allusions: *a clambake* (as a reference to an outdoor social gathering), *a couch potato* (a TV junky), *a couch tomato* (an allusion to the spouse of a couch potato), *milk and water* (as a reference to the liberals), *a tart* (as a reference to sexually promiscuous women).

Like English proverbs, English idioms are concerned with ordinary life, and illustrate the mentality of a nation and even the relationship between the speakers in concrete imagery. Sometimes idioms help form speech styles in particular geographical regions or even in a specific field of activity.

People bear in mind large sets of conventional images of the world around them, depending upon their specific culture. These images are context independent and remain in the speakers' subconscious. Generally speaking, languages contain concepts which differ from one another because each language has its own organization, and preserves its own culture, which leads to identifying social experiences and knowledge in their own specific phrases. In addition, idioms often reflect the culture and tradition of each country, making them unique expressions of a given language.

3. Proverbs as Means of Cultural Identity

The most fascinating and challenging experience while studying a foreign language is offered by idiomatic expressions and proverbs, the latter ones being larger contexts of concrete usage events which allow people to experience and conceptualize the world we live in. The meanings of the phrases constantly change as the amount of knowledge about them increases. Discovering deeper levels of cognition, there is a constant need to supply new terms for new concepts as they appear, triggered by the continuous development of human knowledge.

Viewed in a narrow sense, proverbs and sayings are the largest class of idioms. In language, proverbs describe particular situations that may be applied to our general understanding. Proverbs are complex and reflect the wisdom of a culture. Given their figurative meaning, they offer rich material for analysis. In Mieder's (2004: 3) opinion, "a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of a folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation." The metaphorical proverb

presupposes a complex passing from the particular to the general and then back to the particular, but on a large scale. In an example such as: "*It takes all sorts to make a world*" the correct decoding of the proverb depends on the receiver's degree of metaphorical perception. The message emphasized by the proverb is that people have different characters, opinions and abilities, and we cannot do anything but to accept this. The proverb's linguistic connotations meet the aesthetic ones with which they associate and combine. The meanings depicted by proverbs are linked through mutual abstract ideas.

Discussing the structure of the proverbs, Mieder (2004: 7) draws our attention to the fact that proverbs can be reduced to certain structures or patterns. The author then specifies the existence of a pattern in English proverbs which is fundamental for the modern proverb. The pattern is of the following types: "Better X than Y", "Like X, like Y", "No X without Y", "If X, then Y", calling to mind such well-known proverbs as "Better *poor* with honour than rich with shame," "Like *father,* like son", "No *work,* no pay", "One *robin* doesn't make a spring", and "If at first you don't *succeed*, then try, try again." Other patterns may be added to the ones already enumerated: *"Early to bed, early to rise", "When the cat's away the mice will play", "Where there's smoke there's fire", "Waste not, want not", "Penny wise, pound foolish."* These patterns use rhyme and alliteration in order to convey meaning and thus are easy to remember. Patterns such as *"Look before you leap", "A foolish and his money are soon parted", Birds of a feather flock together"* are short sentences whose meaning is easy to understand.

Based on the development of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, proverbs can be categorized in classes of structures called "Generic is Specific." The promoters of this theory, George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989: 160), agree on the proverb's power of instructing us, as readers, to understand and conduct our lives according to the pieces of advice derived from proverbs. By interpreting proverbs, speakers have to understand the analogy which emphasizes a message. During the process of interpretation, the authors suggest that we make use of the Great Chain Metaphor which is composed of the GENERIC IS

SPECIFIC metaphor. With its help we, as interpreters, are able to select from specific schemas a common-generic-level structure. These schemas contain data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory, which are rich in images and information. The specific-level schemas offer specific details and concrete images. For example, when saying "*So many men, so many options*" we use specific-level schemas. This message can be applied to a broader class of people. According to this proverb, we understand that, there are as many options as there are men, and that it is not necessary for all the people to share the same opinions. A different version of the same proverb would be "*If minds were alike, goods would age in the shops.*" Thus, we can say that a statement about a particular situation may convey a general understanding. This is possible with the help of the generic-level metaphor, GENERIC IS SPECIFIC, which maps a single specific schema onto a large number of parallel specific schemas. All these share the same generic-level structure as the source-domain schema. In fact, what it does is to limit source and target domains by imposing to the source to be a specific-level schema and to the target to be a generic-level schema. Then, the mapping of GENERIC IS SPECIFIC has to keep the generic-level structure of the target domain, and to gain as much generic-level structure of the source domain. As a result, the source and the target must have the same generic-level structure. This means that GENERIC IS SPECIFIC maps specific-level schemas onto the generic-level schemas that they contain. If we are to use GENERIC IS SPECIFIC in order to understand the same proverb as used in a particular situation, then, we would have to imagine that different people, no matter how similar they are, think the same. From the schema associated with this proverb, we can extract only generic-level information because we all know that "*All meat pleases not all mouths*", that "*There is no disputing about tastes*" and "*One man's meat is another man's poison.*" In exemplifying the differences between people, our list of examples could go on as follows: "*All feet tread not in one shoe*" or "*Every shoe fits not every foot*", "*If one will not, another will*" or "*Every man after his fashion.*"

Taken in isolation, a metaphor of an abstract idea may create micro-contexts. When used in larger contexts, it becomes the metaphor of the particular case to which it is applied. A part of the micro-context has both a metaphoric and a proper meaning, and one of them may prevail (see Andrioai 2012 and 2015). Related to the larger context in which it appears, the micro-context may be a metaphor or not. The intra micro contextual synonymy that appears in proverbs may also generate metaphors in proverbs. For example, in "*Throw bread when the other side throws stone*" none of the terms gets a connotative value. Although metaphorization does not exist, each word is used with its denotative value. In some micro-contexts, words get connotative values. Many proverbs are formed around a core term that acquires new connotations. Proverbs presuppose a metaphoric statement because, beyond the truth emphasized through images, it constitutes the target of the person that reproduces it.

Food is featured as standard reference in many proverbs. When using individual foods in situations which take place in our life, the meaning is enriched. Illustrative in this case are the following examples: "*Bread is the staff of life*", "*When meat is in, anger is out*", "*Man cannot live by bread alone*", "*Salt seasons all things*", "*Of soup and love,*" "*The first is the best*", "*Garlic makes man wink, drink and stink*", "*Cheese digests everything but itself*", "*An apple a day keeps the doctor away*", "*Much meat, much malady,*" etc. All these examples prove that people use food as a symbol to convey a lot of new meanings created by the situations taken as a whole. When trying to use food as a cultural sign, it speaks about identity and becomes an integral part of a moral code. "*Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what you are*" or "*Eat to live and not live to eat*" are illustrative for this category of proverbs which prove that IDENTITY IS FOOD which, even if it emphasizes eating habits, also serves as a framework for thinking about the world. Proverbs offer general characterizations and are grounded in the richness of the special case. With their help, we are able to comprehend complex faculties of human beings in terms of other things.

For George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989: 165), the generic-level schemas are illustrative when it comes to specificity because

> specific-level schemas are both concrete and information rich: they have rich imagery associated with them, they are memorable, they are connected to our everyday experiences, and they contain a relatively large amount of information about those concrete everyday experiences.

The GENERIC IS SPECIFIC does not only work in particular situations but also in their absence. In fact, it fits a range of possible specific-level target schemas even when reading proverbs taken out of contexts. Proverbs stated as sentences may provide contexts that strongly constrain possible inferences and people might be tempted to include irrelevant information. People get literal meanings and seem to get specific schemas because proverbs allow us to select mental structures and mechanisms based on contextual constraints.

It is through proverbs that people gather important aspects such as the specificity of their language. The language genus and the nations' specific particularities live within the messages conveyed by proverbs which make use of numerous linguistic strategies that prove their wisdom. Their frequent occurrence in daily speech suggests that people use them as strategies in social interaction with the purpose of delivering certain types of information.

Conclusions

The cognitive view has an important relativist role in the process of meaning interpretation by helping speakers learn, understand and interpret messages in terms of culture. Both idioms and proverbs enrich the vocabulary of the speakers with the symbols and cultural concepts of a nation. Proverbs metaphorically illustrate realities about the human existence. Language beautifully reveals social representations by means of metaphors, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, concepts and image-schemas. These linguistic strategies are

part of a complex collective mind which speaks about a social reality. From a cultural point of view, proverbs and linguistic expressions are patterns of social representations which are meant to guide and organize people according to some rules. Language and culture are connected through these patterns which serve as marks of identity/ national products as a whole. As long as people apply so many linguistic strategies, metaphorical language shall never lose the central place it occupies in everyday speech, and language will always evolve, flourishing and gaining new meanings.

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