

Idiomaticity And Conceptual Metaphors In The Modern English Lexicon

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Abstract: Idiomatic expressions and conceptual metaphors constitute essential dimensions of the modern English lexicon, serving as linguistic tools through which speakers encode abstract meaning, cultural knowledge, and evaluative stance. This study explores the interaction between idiomaticity and conceptual metaphors in contemporary English, focusing on how metaphorical mappings structure idioms and how idiomatic usage reinforces entrenched conceptual frameworks. Using a qualitative conceptual methodology, the research analyzes recurring metaphorical patterns in idiomatic expressions related to emotions, cognition, and social relationships. The findings reveal that idiomaticity in modern English is heavily grounded in embodied metaphorical domains, enabling speakers to conceptualize abstract experiences through concrete imagery. The paper argues that understanding the metaphor–idiom relationship enriches lexical analysis and provides insights into cognitive structuring in everyday communication.

Keywords: Idiomatic expressions, conceptual metaphors, metaphorical mappings, idiomatic usage, idiomaticity and conceptual metaphors.

Introduction: Idiomaticity is a salient feature of the English lexicon, reflecting historical developments, cultural heritage, and conceptual patterns that structure human experience. Idioms—such as break the ice, spill the beans, or hit the road—convey meanings beyond literal interpretation and require shared cultural knowledge for effective decoding. Conceptual metaphor theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon by proposing that language is grounded in metaphorical mappings drawn

from bodily and environmental experience.

In modern communication, idiomaticity remains pervasive not only in spoken interaction but also in digital discourse, mass media, and academic language. However, the cognitive mechanisms underlying idiomatic interpretation remain insufficiently addressed in lexicological scholarship. Specifically, the extent to which conceptual metaphors motivate idiomatic expressions continues to be a productive field of inquiry.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the research

question:

How do conceptual metaphors structure idiomatic expressions in the modern English lexicon, and what semantic patterns emerge from their interaction?

METHODS

A qualitative conceptual research methodology was employed to investigate the relationship between conceptual metaphors and idiomaticity. The study was conducted in three stages.

First, a corpus-informed list of idiomatic expressions was compiled from the Oxford English Dictionary, the Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, and linguistic corpora such as COCA and BNC. Expressions were selected according to frequency, contemporary relevance, and metaphorical transparency.

Second, idioms were categorized into semantic domains commonly associated with metaphorical structuring: emotions, cognition, social interaction, and motion.

Third, idioms were analyzed through the lens of conceptual metaphor theory following established conceptual mappings such as emotion is heat, thought is object manipulation, and life is a journey. Only idioms whose meanings could be explained through systematic metaphorical patterns were included in the final interpretation. While quantitative corpus frequency analysis was not applied, contextual usage informed semantic interpretation consistent with pragmatic usage in contemporary discourse.

RESULTS

Analysis revealed three dominant semantic patterns illustrating how conceptual metaphors shape idiomatic expressions in modern English.

1. Embodied metaphors structuring emotional idioms

Idioms involving emotional states demonstrated reliance on conceptual domains grounded in bodily experience. Expressions such as “blow off steam,” “warm to someone,” and “boiling with anger” align with the mapping emotion is heat, illustrating how emotional intensity is conceptualized through temperature and physical pressure. These idioms reinforce embodied cognition by linking abstract emotional states to physiological sensations.

2. object manipulation metaphors in cognitive idioms

Cognitive idioms frequently draw on metaphors related to physical manipulation. Expressions like “grasp an idea,” “break down a problem,” and “piece together the facts” correspond to the mapping thought is object manipulation, reflecting how mental processes are

conceptualized as tangible operations. This pattern demonstrates that cognitive activity is interpreted through the metaphorical framework of handling physical objects.

3. Journey metaphors structuring idioms of life progression

A substantial number of idioms related to personal development and decision-making align with life is a journey metaphors. Phrases such as “at a crossroads,” “on the right track,” “back to square one,” and “going downhill” encode life progression through spatial movement. These idioms provide speakers with a shared conceptual map for understanding personal trajectory and social mobility.

Together, the findings demonstrate that idiomaticity in the modern English lexicon is tightly integrated with conceptual metaphors, enabling cognitive consistency and communicative efficiency.

DISCUSSION

The semantic patterns identified in this study show that idiomatic expressions are not arbitrary lexical units but motivated by systematic conceptual mappings. Embodied metaphors illustrate how idiomaticity retains traces of physical experience in linguistic form, demonstrating the cognitive grounding of lexical meaning.

Moreover, idiomaticity helps preserve cultural models by disseminating shared metaphorical patterns across generations. For instance, journey metaphors not only encode life progression but also express cultural values associated with progress, autonomy, and achievement.

These findings align with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument that metaphor is fundamental to human thought, extending beyond figures of speech into everyday lexical choice. Idioms represent a linguistic surface where conceptual metaphors become accessible to analysis, offering evidence of how language encodes cognition.

For lexicological research, recognizing metaphor–idiom relationships contributes to understanding semantic motivation and lexical non-compositionality. For applied linguistics, it supports teaching strategies that emphasize metaphor-based idiom learning, which may enhance retention, interpretation, and cross-cultural comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Idiomaticity and conceptual metaphors are intrinsically linked within the modern English lexicon. Idioms draw on embodied metaphorical domains to express abstract meanings concisely and memorably, while conceptual metaphors act as cognitive frameworks that guide idiomatic formation and interpretation.

Recognizing this relationship deepens understanding of lexical semantics and offers pedagogical applications for vocabulary instruction, cultural literacy, and metaphor awareness in language learning. Future research should incorporate corpus-based statistical frequency analysis and cross-linguistic comparison to trace how conceptual metaphors evolve with changing communicative practices.

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