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IDIOMATIC MEANING BEYOND HISTORICAL IMAGERY

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Abstract: *Idioms are generally understood as fixed expressions whose meanings can not be derived from the meanings of their individual components. Many idioms in everyday English are based on tools, technologies, social practices, and ways of life that are no longer familiar to contemporary speakers. This article examines such expressions as fossil idioms: idioms whose original imagery has become obsolete, while their figurative meaning remains fully functional. Using a dataset of thirty high-frequency English idioms and a speaker-awareness questionnaire administered to forty participants, the study shows that idiom comprehension is largely independent of knowledge of original imagery. The findings support the view that idioms survive cultural change by becoming conventionalized semantic units rather than remaining actively interpreted metaphors.*

Keywords: *fossil idioms, phraseology, metaphor opacity, cultural change, English idioms*

Introduction

Idioms play a central role in everyday language use, enabling speakers to express complex meanings in compact and socially recognizable forms. Expressions such as *burn the midnight oil*, *cut corners*, or *hang up the phone* are produced and understood effortlessly by modern speakers, even though the material and cultural conditions that originally motivated these expressions have largely disappeared. Oil lamps have been replaced by electric lighting, rotary telephones have fallen out of use, and many traditional labor practices no longer structure daily life. Despite this, the idioms built on these realities remain fully active in contemporary English.

This persistence raises a fundamental question about idiomatic meaning: how do idioms continue to function effectively when their original imagery is no longer accessible or

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relevant to speakers? Traditional accounts often emphasize the metaphorical motivation of idioms, arguing that meaning is grounded in shared experiential knowledge. However, the widespread use of idioms whose imagery is historically remote suggests that idiomatic meaning may persist independently of metaphorical awareness.

The present study addresses this issue by treating certain idioms as linguistic fossils. These expressions preserve traces of earlier cultural stages while functioning synchronically as fixed semantic units. By focusing on common and familiar idioms rather than rare or archaic expressions, the article argues that fossilization is not a marginal phenomenon but a characteristic feature of modern idiomatic usage. The central aim of the study is to examine whether contemporary speakers rely on historical imagery when comprehending such idioms.

Theoretical Background

In phraseological research, idioms are typically defined as conventionalized multi-word expressions whose meanings are not fully predictable from their individual components. Cognitive linguistic approaches have further proposed that many idioms are motivated by conceptual metaphors that map abstract meanings onto concrete experiences such as bodily movement, physical labor, or spatial orientation. From this perspective, idioms are not arbitrary linguistic forms but are grounded in embodied and cultural experience.

At the same time, several scholars have noted that metaphorical motivation does not necessarily remain cognitively active over time. As cultural practices change, the imagery underlying idioms may lose its transparency. Speakers may continue to use an idiom accurately and fluently without any awareness of its original source domain. This phenomenon has been described as metaphor erosion or imagistic opacity.

Building on this insight, the present study distinguishes between *semantic transparency* and *imagistic transparency*. An idiom may be semantically transparent in the sense that its meaning is widely known and easily recognized, while being imagistically opaque because the original image is no longer understood or mentally activated. Fossil idioms represent an extreme case of this divergence, in which meaning is maintained almost entirely through linguistic convention rather than through metaphorical interpretation.

Data and Method

The empirical basis of this study consists of a dataset of thirty high-frequency English idioms whose original imagery refers to obsolete or declining technologies, practices, or systems of labor and measurement. The idioms were selected according to three criteria. First, they remain common in contemporary spoken and written English. Second, their original imagery is historically identifiable and clearly connected to cultural practices that

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are no longer part of everyday life. Third, their current meaning can be understood without reference to that imagery.

Examples include expressions such as *dial a number*, which refers to the rotary dialing mechanism of early telephones; *burn the midnight oil*, which originates from the use of oil lamps for nighttime work; and *bite the bullet*, commonly associated with pre-anesthetic battlefield surgery. Although these expressions remain widely used, the material realities they refer to are unfamiliar to many younger speakers.

To examine the relationship between idiom meaning and imagery awareness, a short speaker-awareness questionnaire was designed. For each idiom, participants were asked (1) whether they knew the meaning of the expression, (2) whether they believed they knew its origin, and (3) if so, to describe the original image associated with it. Responses were open-ended. Explanations were classified as historically accurate if they corresponded to established etymological accounts. The purpose of the questionnaire was not to test formal linguistic competence, but to assess whether speakers rely on historical imagery when interpreting idioms.

The participants were forty fluent speakers of English between the ages of eighteen and thirty. None had received formal training in historical linguistics, etymology, or phraseology. This group was selected to represent ordinary language users rather than specialists.

Results

The questionnaire results reveal a clear contrast between participants' ability to recognize idiom meaning and their awareness of original imagery. Across the dataset, the vast majority of participants demonstrated accurate understanding of idiomatic meaning. On average, eighty-five percent of responses reflected correct meaning recognition. In contrast, approximately forty percent of participants reported some awareness of idiom origin, while only about twenty percent provided historically accurate explanations of the imagery.

This pattern was consistent across individual idioms. In the case of *hang up the phone*, all participants correctly identified the meaning, but only half of them associated the expression with the physical act of placing a receiver on a hook. Similarly, *burn the midnight oil* was widely understood as meaning "to work late into the night," yet only around forty percent of participants connected it to the historical use of oil lamps. The idiom *rule of thumb* showed an even sharper contrast: while the meaning was familiar to most participants, almost none could explain its origin in informal, body-based measurement practices.

These results indicate that idiom comprehension does not depend on access to original imagery. Instead, idiomatic meaning appears to be stored and retrieved as part of speakers' lexical knowledge, largely independent of historical or cultural explanation.

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Measure	Percentage of Participants
Correct idiom meaning recognized	85%
Some awareness of idiom origin	40%
Historically accurate imagery explanation	20%

Analysis

The findings suggest that fossil idioms can be analyzed in terms of different types of cultural and cognitive fossilization. The first type includes idioms that preserve references to obsolete technologies. Expressions such as *dial a number* or *carbon copy* continue to function because speakers treat them as conventional verbal labels rather than as literal descriptions. The technological process itself is no longer cognitively relevant, but the expression persists due to its communicative efficiency and habitual use.

A second type consists of idioms rooted in historical practices that have disappeared from everyday experience. Expressions such as *bite the bullet* or *read the riot act* are no longer associated with their original contexts of battlefield medicine or legal proclamation. Instead, they function as abstract markers of psychological endurance or authoritative warning. While the original practices have faded, the pragmatic function of the idioms remains stable.

A third type includes idioms based on pre-modern systems of labor and measurement. Expressions such as *keep your nose to the grindstone* or *rule of thumb* reflect a world of manual labor and informal measurement that has largely been replaced by standardized and mechanized systems. For most speakers, these idioms no longer evoke concrete physical imagery and instead function as fixed evaluative expressions.

Across all three types, a common pattern emerges: fossil idioms are no longer processed as active metaphors. Speakers do not consciously map source domains onto target meanings. Instead, idioms are accessed as holistic units stored in memory. This explains why imagistic opacity does not hinder comprehension. Meaning is preserved through repeated use, social convention, and contextual reinforcement rather than through cognitive simulation of the original image.

Discussion

The persistence of fossil idioms challenges strong versions of the cognitive linguistic claim that metaphorical motivation plays a central role in idiom comprehension. While metaphor may help explain how idioms originate, it does not necessarily account for how

they function synchronically. The present findings suggest that, over time, idioms may lose their metaphorical grounding and instead become conventionalized linguistic signs.

From a cultural perspective, fossil idioms function as linguistic traces of earlier stages of social life. They preserve fragments of obsolete technologies and practices within everyday language, even as speakers lose conscious awareness of them. In this sense, idioms act as carriers of cultural memory, although this memory is implicit and weakened rather than actively interpreted.

For linguistic theory, this study supports a gradient view of idiomaticity in which imagistic transparency is not a prerequisite for semantic stability. For language teaching, the findings suggest that idioms should be taught primarily as meaning-based units, with historical imagery presented as optional enrichment rather than as a necessary interpretive resource. For translation, the results highlight the importance of functional equivalence over literal imagery, particularly when original metaphors are no longer culturally accessible.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that many common English idioms are best understood as fossilized expressions whose meanings outlive the cultural realities that originally produced them. Speakers rely on convention rather than imagery to interpret these idioms, which accounts for their durability in the face of technological and social change. Idioms, therefore, are not only tools of communication but also enduring linguistic remnants of the past.

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