CULTURAL AND SEMANTIC ASPECTS OF PROPER NAMES IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

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Abstract. *Proper names in English idioms represent a special intersection of language, culture, and collective memory. In such expressions, a name no longer functions only as a marker of a unique person or place; it becomes a condensed semantic sign carrying evaluation, narrative association, historical experience, and cultural symbolism. The study of idioms with anthroponyms, toponyms, biblical names, mythological names, and literary names demonstrates that phraseology preserves layers of national worldview that cannot be reduced to literal meaning alone. Expressions such as Achilles' heel, Pandora's box, carry coals to Newcastle, a doubting Thomas, or Jekyll and Hyde show how English encodes ethical judgments, social stereotypes, cultural allusions, and intertextual memory through proper names.*

Keywords: *proper names, idioms, phraseology, cultural semantics, anthroponyms, toponyms, intertextuality, linguistic worldview.*

INTRODUCTION

Idioms have long been treated as one of the most culturally saturated layers of language because their meanings are rarely predictable from the meanings of their components. Phraseology studies precisely such fixed or semi-fixed combinations, which are stored and interpreted as ready-made units rather than freely generated strings. Within this domain, idioms containing proper names constitute a particularly rich subgroup. They combine the formal stability of phraseological units with the symbolic density of onomastic material. A proper name in ordinary reference points to a unique entity, but in phraseological usage it undergoes semantic restructuring: it ceases to identify one concrete person or place and begins to denote a generalized quality, situation, behavior pattern, or evaluation. Linguistic research on English phraseology shows that such units often preserve historically, socially, or culturally prominent names and therefore offer direct evidence for the interaction between lexicon and cultural memory [1], [2], [3].

The semantic distinctiveness of proper names in idioms lies in their movement from reference to characterization. In free discourse, a name such as Thomas, Achilles, Pandora, or Newcastle is tied to a referent. Inside an idiom, the same form activates encyclopedic knowledge and becomes a carrier of selected salient features: a doubting Thomas evokes skepticism, Achilles' heel vulnerability, Pandora's box the release of uncontrollable troubles, and carry coals to Newcastle pointless redundancy. This process does not erase the earlier cultural narrative; rather, it compresses it into a reusable semantic formula. Pierini's study of English phraseology demonstrates that proper names in idioms reveal strong links to British cultural prominence, while broader phraseological research emphasizes that figurative units are often motivated by intertextual, historical, and culture-based knowledge structures [3], [4].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

From a classificatory perspective, proper names in English idioms can be grouped according to their source domains. The first large group consists of personal names, including historical figures, biblical characters, literary персонажи, and generalized English first names. Expressions such as a doubting Thomas, Peeping Tom, every Tom, Dick, and Harry, Uncle Sam, Scrooge, Jekyll and Hyde, and before you can say Jack Robinson belong to this field. The second group contains place names, as in carry coals to Newcastle, meet one's Waterloo, or from China to Peru. The third group includes mythological and classical names such as Achilles' heel, the sword of Damocles, and between Scylla and Charybdis. A fourth cluster comes from literary and folklore tradition, for example Aladdin's cave or Robin Hood. What unites these categories is not source homogeneity but a shared semiotic mechanism: the name becomes a cultural shorthand whose meaning depends on collective recognition rather than on immediate denotation [3], [4], [5].

The semantic transformation of the proper name within idiom structure may be described as selective abstraction. Only one or several culturally prominent features of the original referent are retained, while the rest of the referential profile is backgrounded. Achilles is not interpreted as the complete Homeric hero but as the emblem of a fatal weak point; Pandora is not merely a mythological female figure but the trigger of disastrous consequences; Scrooge no longer points only to Dickens's character but to miserliness as a stable social type. In this sense, proper-name idioms are close to antonomasia, since the name is converted into a generalized descriptor. Yet idiomaticity adds another dimension: the meaning belongs not to the isolated name alone but to the fixed phrase as a lexical whole. Research on proper names in phraseology notes that in figurative uses names acquire descriptive and connotational force, drawing on encyclopedic knowledge and culturally stabilized interpretation [3]. Phraseological theory, in turn, treats such units as conventionalized multiword signs rather than occasional stylistic inventions [1], [2].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A central cultural feature of these idioms is intertextual memory. Proper-name idioms are rarely understandable in full isolation from the texts, myths, historical events, or sociocultural practices that generated them. Their endurance in English shows that phraseology functions as a repository of inherited narratives. Biblical culture supplies units like a doubting Thomas or Judas kiss; Greco-Roman tradition contributes Achilles' heel, the sword of Damocles, and between Scylla and Charybdis; British social geography is reflected in idioms such as carry coals to Newcastle; literary culture leaves traces in Jekyll and Hyde, Scrooge, and Cheshire cat. Broader comparative work on idioms stresses that conventional figurative expressions often rest on shared cultural foundations, intertextuality, and socially transmitted models of perception. Therefore, proper-name idioms do not simply name experience; they organize it through historically sedimented cultural scripts [3], [4].

Another notable aspect is the evaluative and pragmatic load carried by these idioms. Proper-name expressions frequently encode praise, irony, criticism, ridicule, or warning. To call someone a Scrooge is not merely to describe economic behavior but to attach moral disapproval. To speak of a policy as another Vietnam or of a negotiation as a Waterloo is to frame the event through a ready-made evaluative scenario. Idioms of this kind shorten argument by importing a cultural judgment that the speech community already knows. Pierini's corpus-oriented analysis shows that many proper-name phraseological units express evaluation, often negative, and that although their actual frequency in corpora may be low, their communicative force remains high because they activate shared sociocultural schemas [3]. This explains why even relatively infrequent idioms can remain rhetorically powerful in journalism, fiction, political discourse, and everyday commentary [3], [5].

The internal cultural asymmetry of English proper-name idioms also deserves attention. Research has shown a predominance of personal over place names, and within personal names a predominance of male over female figures. This imbalance is not accidental; it reflects the historical distribution of cultural visibility, authorship, institutional power, and narrative canonization in the traditions from which English phraseology has drawn its material. When the lexicon repeatedly recycles names such as Tom, Jack, Achilles, Damocles, or Thomas, it reproduces older hierarchies of symbolic prominence. Female figures do occur, but often in more limited or specialized roles, as in Pandora's box. Such asymmetry demonstrates that idioms are not neutral verbal fossils. They preserve ideological traces of the societies that coined, transmitted, and normalized them. Phraseology therefore becomes a useful source not only for semantics but also for cultural history and discourse analysis [3], [4].

From the perspective of intercultural communication, idioms with proper names create serious interpretive difficulties because their semantics depend on culturally specific background knowledge. A non-native speaker may understand the literal components of carry coals to Newcastle and still miss the idiomatic meaning if unaware

of Newcastle's historical association with coal. The same problem arises with before you can say Jack Robinson, where neither the speed-related meaning nor the name's opaque origin is evident from surface form alone. Lexicographic sources are therefore indispensable in explaining not only meaning but also etymological and cultural motivation. Major dictionaries of English idioms devote substantial attention to the origin, contextual use, and semantic development of such expressions, because dictionary definition alone cannot capture their full cultural resonance [5]. For teaching and translation, the task is not simply to replace one phrase with another, but to reconstruct the evaluative force, cultural allusion, and pragmatic function embedded in the original unit [4], [5].

Translation reveals the most acute tension between semantics and culture in this field. A translator confronted with Achilles' heel may find a close equivalent in many languages because the classical allusion is widely shared. Yet expressions like carry coals to Newcastle or Bob's your uncle are much more culture-bound and often resist direct transfer. The translator must decide whether to preserve the name, substitute a target-culture analogue, explain the allusion, or neutralize the figurative force. Each strategy modifies the balance between semantic content and cultural density. Comparative phraseology argues that some figurative units are widespread across languages because of shared intertextual sources, while others remain locally anchored in a particular national experience [4]. Proper-name idioms thus provide a revealing test case for the distinction between universal figurative patterns and culturally local phraseological heritage [3], [4].

CONCLUSION

Proper names in English idioms function as compact cultural signs rather than simple referential labels. Within phraseological structure, they lose the narrow task of pointing to one unique entity and acquire generalized semantic content shaped by historical memory, literary tradition, mythology, religion, geography, and social evaluation. Their meanings emerge through selective abstraction: one salient feature of a person, place, or narrative becomes conventionalized and then reused as a stable idiomatic value. Such units preserve intertextual knowledge, transmit cultural stereotypes, intensify evaluation, and enrich discourse with compressed allusive force. They also expose the asymmetries and priorities of the cultural canon from which the idioms originate. For this reason, the study of proper-name idioms is important not only for phraseology, but also for semantics, cultural linguistics, lexicography, translation studies, and foreign-language pedagogy. English idioms containing proper names demonstrate that language stores culture not only in explicit texts and narratives, but also in fixed expressions whose smallest element may carry centuries of collective interpretation.

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