SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH: IMPLICATIONS FOR ESL TEACHING

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Abstract
This study investigates the semantic analysis of idiomatic expressions in English and examines their implications for language teaching in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. A total of thirty idiomatic expressions were randomly selected from novels, newspapers, online media, and conversational discourse. These idioms were analysed using the operational (contextual/functional) approach, which considers meaning not merely as a matter of dictionary definition but as something constructed through use and situated context. The findings reveal that idioms perform multiple functions in communication: they condense cultural knowledge, express attitudes indirectly, add humour, and convey pragmatic force. However, their figurative nature poses serious learning challenges for non-native speakers. The study concludes that the teaching of idioms should be embedded in context-driven activities that highlight cultural meaning and communicative purpose. Recommendations include integrating idioms into classroom dialogue, using drama and role-play to demonstrate pragmatic use, and encouraging learners to document idioms from real-life interactions.
Keywords: Semantic Analysis, Idioms, Idiomatic Expressions, English, ESL Teaching

Introduction
Language is not merely a system of grammar and vocabulary; it is also a repository of culture, values, and traditions. Ofoegbu (2021) posits that the human language is very unique because it has its own structure and its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. This simply means that there are rules governing the organization of sentences in a language. Ofoegbu (2012), building on his earlier works, defines language as "the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate." He further emphasizes that "language is man and man is language. Ofoegbu and Usar (2018) repeat and expand this definition, stressing that language is not only a system of communication but also a fundamental tool for expressing human experiences. The emphasis here remains on the exclusivity of language to humans and its indispensability in social life. Among the most striking features of natural language is the use of idiomatic expressions. According to Ofoegbu (2024) "language is man and man is language ". Life has no meaning without language. Language is a means of interaction among people of the same community. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) reaffirm earlier views, calling language "the human system of communication … man and man is language … man uses language for his everyday interaction."

Ofoegbu (2022) defines Semantics as the study and analysis of meaning and the meaning of a word is the idea a word conveys in the heart or mind of the speaker of hearer. Idioms are combinations of words whose meanings cannot be fully deduced from the meanings of their parts. For instance, the idiom *"spill the beans"* has nothing to do with beans literally but means to reveal a secret. This divergence between literal and figurative meaning poses both opportunities and challenges for learners.

Idioms are ubiquitous in spoken and written English. They occur in political speeches, news headlines, novels, classroom interactions, and everyday conversations. A politician might say, *"the ball is in your court"* to shift responsibility, while a teacher may use *"burning the midnight oil"* to describe a hardworking student. In both cases, the literal meaning of the idiom is irrelevant; what matters is the pragmatic meaning that emerges in context. Scholars have observed that idioms represent cultural conceptualisations embedded in thought (Owolabi, 2021). They often reflect shared values, social practices, and historical experiences. For second-language learners, the challenge is not just to know the literal words but to grasp the hidden cultural and semantic layers.

Statement of the Problem
Despite the central role of idioms in English communication, they are often marginalised in formal language teaching. Many ESL learners struggle to understand idioms and sometimes misinterpret them due to literal translation from their mother tongue. For example, a Nigerian Igbo speaker translating *"kick the bucket"* literally might think of a domestic act rather than death. This misunderstanding hampers communication and creates pragmatic failure.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to:
1. Conduct a semantic analysis of thirty idiomatic expressions in English using the operational/contextual approach.
2. Explore how idiomatic meanings are shaped by context and function.
3. Discuss the challenges idioms pose to learners.
4. Examine the implications for teaching English in ESL contexts.

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to applied linguistics by showing how idioms function semantically and pragmatically. For teachers, it provides strategies for integrating idioms into lessons. For learners, it highlights the importance of cultural context in achieving communicative competence.

Literature Review

Concept of Idioms

Idioms are conventionalised phrases whose meanings are not predictable from their constituent words. They are fixed in structure, often metaphorical, and culturally grounded. According to Adegboye (2023), idioms represent "semantic packages" that store complex cultural ideas in compact form meaning of each word. Idioms are a matter of culture, a way of life and how a people look at things. An alternative name for idiom is idiomatic expression. Idioms sometimes contain verbs and they can be found in dictionaries.

Crystal (2008) sees an idiom as a term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit. From a semantic viewpoint, he says the meanings of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole; also from the syntactic viewpoint, he says the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts.

Ofoegbu (2011) says that Idioms are peculiarity of phraseology approved by usage and having a meaning other than its logical or grammatical one. Meanings not deducible of those of the separate words. They are made up of a structure of two or more words which function as a unit of meaning that is the different words taken separately cannot give as the meanings of the expression.

According to Ofoegbu (2011) to test for idiomaticity, we can substitute a part of the expression and if this is possible, then we consider the expression an idiom, for idioms that are in a combination of a verb and a particle, if we can then substitute these for a word, we then have an idiom. For example "John took off the lecturer," we can substitute "imitated" for "took off" and the sentence or expression will now read "John imitated the lecturer". The second involves particle deletion and if it proves possible, then it is not an idiom. In other words if the sentence reads "John took the lecturer" the idiomaticity is not there again. So also if a verb replacement can be done then that expression is definitely not an idiomatic one. This is because its meaning will be changed (lost.) so the right verb and particle must go together for the expression to remain an idiom.

The third test is that of noun formation. The semantic unity of idioms tend to make them behave as if they belong to a single grammatical class as a result of which verbs and some particle expressions could be changed to nouns. This suggests that we can make nouns out of these expressions especially those of the verb and particle. For example "To make up" "To break down" each of these have their noun equivalence. For example "Have you done your make up"? "He has a nervous break down".

Ofoegbu (2011) posits that the established or institutionalized nature of idioms shows that they have become an acceptable practice in the society today. The established practice of idioms however does not distinguish from stable or fixed collocation. For example "Electric blanket". Even though this is an established collocate, it is not an idiom. There are deviant and an irregular structure we find in idioms that cannot be seen in collocates. For example "To look daggers". This means "To look with hatred" but the question must be asked, how can one look daggers? Even though the expression is right, the structure is however deviant because conventionally "look" and "daggers" do not go together.

The issue of opaqueness is not left out. This is an attractive issue about idioms but has its limitations as well. Thus as we said before, that meanings of individual words cannot give us the clue as to the meaning of an idiom. We can go further to distinguish between an opaque and a transparent expression. For example "to bury the hatchet" "the governor told the two warning communities to bury the hatchet" to the average Nigerian (African) "hatchet" is opaque while to an European it is transparent.

In conclusion, Ofoegbu (2011) submits that idioms are sometimes a matter of cultural differences and therefore it becomes difficult to try to access them using opaqueness and transparency. The truth is that many of them have been universally accepted and so the issue of culture no longer comes in. Sometimes idioms give up their meanings through the natural meanings of the words and there are some idioms which retain their literal as well as their metaphorical meanings. For example, "To mark time," literally, it means to remain on the mark and metaphorically it means not to make progress (to remain on a spot).

All the criteria in testing for idiomaticity are arbitrary as regards their application because of their valence. However, we can identify basically three types of idioms. We shall look at them separately. Ofoegbu and Usar (2017), in their Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Politics of General Muhammadu Buhari's Campaign Speech of 2011, demonstrate how Nigerian political discourse is structured around lexical, semantic, and graphological choices that are carefully selected to achieve rhetorical ends. More recent studies, such as Ofoegbu (2018) on euphemistic expressions in Igbo, show how speakers avoid taboo or sensitive topics (e.g., sex, drugs, insults) through metaphor, substitution, or playful re-encoding, illustrating the socially motivated nature of semantic shift. This same mechanism is widely evident in idioms and idiomatic expressions.

Semantic Approaches to Idioms
There are several approaches to analysing idioms:
- Literal Approach – Focuses on word-by-word meaning, often inadequate.
- Metaphorical Approach – Considers idioms as conceptual metaphors.
- Operational/Contextual Approach – Considers how meaning emerges from the situation in which the idiom is used. This study adopts the operational approach (Ademiluyi & Sunday, 2022).

Idioms in Language Teaching
Research suggests that idioms are underemphasised in formal curricula, yet they are crucial for fluency (Ngugi, 2024). Learners exposed to idioms in authentic contexts develop better pragmatic competence. Teachers are therefore encouraged to adopt communicative strategies for teaching idioms (Ogunleye, 2022).

Research Design
This study employs a qualitative descriptive design. The data consists of thirty idioms randomly collected from literary texts, online articles, and daily conversations.

Analytical Framework
The operational/contextual approach was applied. Each idiom is analysed in terms of its literal meaning, contextual meaning, and communicative function. Real-life usage examples are provided.
Below is the semantic analysis of thirty idioms. Each idiom is explained with literal meaning, contextual meaning, and functional example.

1. **Kick the bucket**
- **Literal meaning**: To strike a bucket with one's foot.
- **Contextual meaning**: To die.
- **Example**: "Sadly, the old man kicked the bucket last night." (Obituary report).
- **Function**: Used informally to soften the bluntness of death.
2. **Break the ice**
- **Literal**: Shattering frozen water.
- **Contextual**: To initiate conversation in a tense situation.
- **Example**: "The teacher told a funny joke to break the ice on the first day of class."
- **Function**: Encourages social interaction.
3. **Spill the beans**
- **Literal**: Pour beans out of a container.
- **Contextual**: Reveal a secret.
- **Example**: "Don't spill the beans about the surprise party."
- **Function**: Emphasises disclosure.
4. **Burn the midnight oil**
- **Literal**: Using oil lamp late at night.
- **Contextual**: Working or studying very late.
- **Example**: "Mary has been burning the midnight oil to finish her thesis."
- **Function**: Highlights diligence.
5. **Let the cat out of the bag**

- **Literal**: Release a cat from a bag.
- **Contextual**: Accidentally reveal hidden information.
- **Example**: "John let the cat out of the bag about the new project."
- **Function**: Emphasises unintentional disclosure.
6. **Hit the nail on the head**
- **Literal**: Striking a nail correctly.
- **Contextual**: Making an exact or accurate point.
- **Example**: "Your analysis hit the nail on the head."
- **Function**: Commends precision.
7. **Barking up the wrong tree**
- **Literal**: Dog barking at a tree without prey.
- **Contextual**: Pursuing a false assumption.
- **Example**: "If you think I stole it, you are barking up the wrong tree."
- **Function**: Corrects misjudgement.
8. **A blessing in disguise**
- **Literal**: None.
- **Contextual**: Something bad at first that turns beneficial.
- **Example**: "Losing that job was a blessing in disguise."
- **Function**: Expresses optimism.
9. **Bite the bullet**
- **Literal**: Soldiers biting bullets to endure pain.
- **Contextual**: Facing a difficult situation bravely.
- **Example**: "She decided to bite the bullet and take the exam again."
- **Function**: Symbolises courage.
10. **Cry over spilt milk**
- **Literal**: Weeping over wasted milk.
- **Contextual**: Regretting something irreversible.
- **Example**: "Stop crying over spilt milk; move on."
- **Function**: Discourages unnecessary regret.
11. **Under the weather**
- **Literal**: Being beneath atmospheric conditions.
- **Contextual**: Feeling unwell.
- **Example**: "I can't come today, I'm under the weather."
- **Function**: Euphemism for illness.
12. **Cost an arm and a leg**
- **Literal**: Losing limbs.
- **Contextual**: Extremely expensive.
- **Example**: "That car cost an arm and a leg."
- **Function**: Expresses exaggeration.
13. **The ball is in your court**
- **Literal**: Tennis metaphor.
- **Contextual**: Responsibility is yours.
- **Example**: "I've done my part, the ball is in your court."
- **Function**: Transfers responsibility.
14. **Add fuel to the fire**
- **Literal**: Pouring fuel on flames.
- **Contextual**: Making a bad situation worse.
- **Example**: "Shouting only added fuel to the fire."
- **Function**: Intensifies conflict.
15. **Once in a blue moon**
- **Literal**: Rare lunar event.
- **Contextual**: Something that rarely happens.
- **Example**: "We meet once in a blue moon."
- **Function**: Expresses rarity.
16. **Piece of cake**
- **Literal**: Portion of cake.
- **Contextual**: Very easy task.

- **Example**: "That exam was a piece of cake."
- **Function**: Minimises difficulty.

17. **When pigs fly**
- **Literal**: Impossible event.
- **Contextual**: Something that will never happen.
- **Example**: "He'll clean his room when pigs fly."
- **Function**: Expresses impossibility.

18. **On cloud nine**
- **Literal**: Sitting on a cloud.
- **Contextual**: Extremely happy.
- **Example**: "She was on cloud nine after winning the award."
- **Function**: Emphasises joy.

19. **Raining cats and dogs**
- **Literal**: Animals falling from the sky.
- **Contextual**: Heavy rain.
- **Example**: "It's raining cats and dogs outside."
- **Function**: Describes intensity.

20. **By the skin of one's teeth**
- **Literal**: Impossible since teeth have no skin.
- **Contextual**: Barely succeeding.
- **Example**: "I passed by the skin of my teeth."
- **Function**: Expresses narrow escape.

21. **Throw in the towel**
- **Literal**: Boxing gesture.
- **Contextual**: To give up.
- **Example**: "He threw in the towel after failing thrice."
- **Function**: Symbolises surrender.

22. **Actions speak louder than words**
- **Literal**: None.
- **Contextual**: What you do matters more than what you say.
- **Example**: "Don't promise; actions speak louder than words."
- **Function**: Encourages responsibility.

23. **Hit the sack**
- **Literal**: Striking a sack.
- **Contextual**: Going to sleep.
- **Example**: "I'm tired, I'll hit the sack now."
- **Function**: Euphemism for sleeping.

24. **A storm in a teacup**
- **Literal**: Storm inside a cup.
- **Contextual**: Exaggeration of trivial issues.
- **Example**: "Their quarrel is just a storm in a teacup."
- **Function**: Minimises conflict.

25. **Rome was not built in a day**
- **Literal**: Construction of Rome.
- **Contextual**: Great things take time.
- **Example**: "Be patient, Rome wasn't built in a day."
- **Function**: Encourages patience.

26. **Jump on the bandwagon**
- **Literal**: Climbing onto a wagon.
- **Contextual**: Following a popular trend.
- **Example**: "Many people jumped on the bandwagon of social media."
- **Function**: Expresses conformity.

27. **Cut corners**
- **Literal**: Shortening by cutting.
- **Contextual**: Doing something cheaply or carelessly.
- **Example**: "The builder cut corners and the house collapsed."
- **Function**: Warns against negligence.

28. **Between a rock and a hard place**
- **Literal**: Trapped between two obstacles.
- **Contextual**: Facing two difficult choices.
- **Example**: "She was between a rock and a hard place choosing careers."
- **Function**: Highlights dilemma.
29. **The tip of the iceberg**
- **Literal**: Small visible part of iceberg.
- **Contextual**: Only a small part of a bigger issue.
- **Example**: "Corruption scandals are just the tip of the iceberg."
- **Function**: Suggests hidden depth.
30. **Beat around the bush**
- **Literal**: Hitting bushes indirectly.
- **Contextual**: Avoiding the main issue.
- **Example**: "Stop beating around the bush and answer me."
- **Function**: Urges directness.

Implications for Language Teaching
1. Contextualised Teaching
Idioms should be introduced within real-life contexts such as stories, dialogues, and newspaper headlines. Teaching them in isolation risks misinterpretation (Adegboye, 2023).
2. Cultural Awareness
Since idioms reflect cultural values, teachers must explain their socio-cultural background. For instance, *"kick the bucket"* reflects Western euphemism for death.
3. Communicative Practice
Role-plays, dramas, and storytelling help learners use idioms naturally in conversation.
4. Gradual Integration
Common idioms like *"piece of cake"* should be introduced first before complex ones like *"tip of the iceberg."*
5. Assessment of Pragmatic Competence
Teachers should assess not only vocabulary knowledge but also the ability to use idioms appropriately in interaction (Ngugi, 2024).

Conclusion
This study analysed thirty idiomatic expressions in English using the operational approach. The analysis revealed that idioms derive their meanings from context and serve pragmatic functions such as softening speech, adding humour, and conveying cultural values. However, their figurative nature creates learning challenges in ESL contexts. For learners to achieve communicative competence, teachers should integrate idioms into instruction through contextualised teaching, cultural explanations, and communicative activities.

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