NAMES, MIND, AND MEANING IN ENGLISH IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

The present article studies English idiomatic expressions containing proper names from a linguo-cognitive perspective. Idioms with onomastic elements represent a culturally and conceptually rich subclass of English phraseology, in which proper names lose their primary referential function and acquire symbolic and generalized meanings. Drawing on data from idiom dictionaries and language corpora, the study analyzes anthroponyms, toponyms, and mythological or biblical names to reveal the cognitive mechanisms underlying their semantic reinterpretation. The analysis demonstrates that idiomatic meaning is motivated by conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, and culturally embedded frames that activate shared background knowledge. The findings highlight the significant role of proper names as cognitive triggers in meaning formation and contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between language, mind, and culture. The study also discusses implications for cognitive linguistics, phraseology, language teaching, and intercultural communication.

Keywords:

onomastic idioms, proper names, anthroponyms, toponyms, mythological names, idiomatic expressions, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, frame semantics, cultural knowledge, phraseology, semantic motivation, language teaching, intercultural communication

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions constitute an essential and expressive component of the English language, reflecting not only linguistic creativity but also culturally and cognitively grounded ways of conceptualizing reality. As fixed or semi-fixed combinations whose meanings cannot always be inferred from the literal meanings of their components, idioms present a significant area of interest within phraseology and cognitive linguistics. Through idioms, speakers encode shared experiences, evaluations, and cultural knowledge, making them a valuable object of linguistic study.

A particularly noteworthy group within English idioms is formed by expressions that contain proper names, or onymic elements. These onomastic idioms include personal names, place names, mythological and biblical names, which function beyond their primary referential role. In idiomatic usage, proper names often acquire generalized, symbolic meanings and evoke culturally salient associations, stereotypes, or prototypical characteristics. As a result, proper names contribute significantly to the formation, interpretation, and memorability of idiomatic expressions.

The linguo-cognitive approach offers an effective framework for analyzing such idioms, as it emphasizes the relationship between language, mental processes, and conceptual structures. From this perspective, idiomatic meaning is not arbitrary but motivated by cognitive mechanisms such as conceptual metaphor, metonymy, and frame-based knowledge. Applying a linguo-cognitive lens to onomastic idioms makes it possible to reveal how proper names activate shared cultural models and how these models are processed and interpreted by language users.

Despite growing interest in cognitive approaches to phraseology, the role of proper names in idiomatic meaning construction remains insufficiently explored. Many studies focus on the semantic or etymological aspects of idioms, while the cognitive contribution of onymic elements is often treated marginally. This gap motivates the present study, which seeks to provide a systematic linguo-cognitive analysis of English idioms containing proper names.

The aim of this article is to examine how proper names function as cognitive and semantic components in English idiomatic expressions. The specific objectives are to identify the main types of onomastic idioms in English, to analyze the cognitive mechanisms underlying their meaning, and to demonstrate how cultural knowledge is embedded and activated through proper names.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: How do proper names contribute to the formation of idiomatic meaning in English? What cognitive mechanisms underlie the semantic reinterpretation of onymic elements in idioms? In what ways do cultural and conceptual knowledge influence the interpretation of onomastic idioms?

The article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical background of idioms and onomastics within a cognitive-linguistic framework. The second section describes the data and methodology of the study. The third section presents an analysis of selected English onomastic idioms, followed by a discussion of the findings. The final section summarizes the main conclusions and suggests directions for further research.

Theoretical Background

Within cognitive linguistics, idioms are viewed not as arbitrary or purely lexicalized units, but as meaningful constructions motivated by general cognitive principles. Unlike traditional approaches that treat idioms as fixed expressions whose meanings must be memorized, the cognitive-linguistic perspective emphasizes the role of conceptualization in idiom interpretation. Idiomatic meaning is understood as arising from the interaction between linguistic form and underlying conceptual structures shaped by human experience.

Cognitive linguists argue that many idioms are partially or fully motivated by embodied experience and shared cultural knowledge. Even when idioms appear

semantically unclear, their meanings often become interpretable once the conceptual metaphors or metonymic relations underlying them are identified. From this viewpoint, idioms form part of the mental lexicon as conventionalized pairings of form and meaning, structured by conceptual patterns rather than isolated memorized phrases.

Onomastic elements, or proper names, play a distinctive role in phraseology. In idiomatic expressions, proper names lose their direct referential function and acquire a generalized, symbolic meaning. Personal names (anthroponyms), place names (toponyms), mythological and biblical names frequently appear in idioms to represent typical human traits, situations, or evaluative judgments.

For example, personal names in idioms often stand for stereotypical characteristics associated with a cultural prototype, while place names evoke historically or culturally significant locations that function as conceptual anchors. Mythological and biblical names, in turn, rely on shared narrative knowledge and cultural memory. Thus, onomastic idioms function as condensed carriers of cultural and conceptual information, making them especially salient from a linguo-cognitive perspective.

From a phraseological standpoint, idioms containing proper names demonstrate how lexical units associated with individual identity can be reinterpreted as abstract semantic symbols. This semantic shift highlights the dynamic interaction between language, cognition, and culture in idiom formation.

The interpretation of onomastic idioms is primarily governed by three interconnected cognitive mechanisms: conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, and cultural framing.

Conceptual metaphor involves understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another. In onomastic idioms, proper names often serve as source domains

that metaphorically map culturally salient characteristics onto more abstract concepts, such as behavior, morality, or evaluation.

Conceptual metonymy operates through contiguity rather than similarity. In many idioms, a proper name refers not to an individual but to a well-known attribute, action, or narrative associated with that name. This allows a name to stand for a broader concept within the same cognitive domain, facilitating semantic compression and expressiveness.

Cultural frames provide the background knowledge necessary for interpreting onomastic idioms. Frames consist of structured cultural information, including historical events, literary traditions, religious narratives, and social stereotypes. Without access to these shared frames, the idiomatic meaning of expressions containing proper names may remain opaque, particularly for non-native speakers.

Together, these cognitive mechanisms explain how proper names in idioms are transformed from referential labels into powerful conceptual tools that structure meaning, evaluation, and cultural identity in English idiomatic expressions.

Data Sources

The empirical material for the present study consists of English idiomatic expressions containing proper names (onomastic idioms). The data were collected from authoritative idiom dictionaries and supplemented with examples from linguistic corpora to ensure authenticity and contextual relevance. Idiom dictionaries provide a systematic and conventionalized inventory of phraseological units, while corpora offer insight into actual language use and frequency patterns.

Lexicographic sources include general and specialized idiom dictionaries, such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* and *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*, which are widely used in phraseological research (Cowie, Mackin & McCaig,

1983; Spears, 2005). To complement dictionary data, corpus-based examples were drawn from large electronic corpora of contemporary English, such as the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). These corpora allow for the observation of idioms in real communicative contexts and across different registers (Sinclair, 1991; Davies, 2008).

Selection Criteria for Onomastic Idioms

The selection of idioms for analysis was based on several criteria. First, the idioms had to contain an explicit proper name, including personal names (anthroponyms), place names (toponyms), or mythological and biblical names. Second, only idiomatic expressions with a stable, non-literal meaning were included, excluding free word combinations and transparent collocations. Third, the idioms selected had to be attested in reputable lexicographic or corpus sources to ensure their conventionality and relevance in modern English.

Additionally, the study focused on idioms in which the proper name plays a semantically significant role in meaning construction, rather than functioning as a purely decorative or incidental element. This criterion makes it possible to analyze how proper names contribute cognitively to idiomatic interpretation and conceptualization (Fernando, 1996; Langlotz, 2006).

Cognitive-Semantic Method of Analysis

The analysis is conducted within a cognitive-semantic framework, which treats idiomatic meaning as motivated and conceptually structured rather than arbitrary. The method involves identifying the cognitive mechanisms underlying the semantic reinterpretation of proper names in idioms, with particular attention to conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, and culturally grounded knowledge structures.

Each idiom is analyzed by examining the conceptual associations linked to the proper name and the way these associations are mapped onto the idiomatic

meaning. Conceptual metaphor theory is used to explain cases where meaning arises through cross-domain mapping, while conceptual metonymy accounts for meaning based on contiguity and salient attributes associated with a name (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010). Cultural frames and background knowledge are also considered essential for interpreting onomastic idioms, as they activate shared historical, literary, or social information (Fillmore, 1982).

This cognitive-semantic approach allows for a systematic explanation of how proper names function as conceptual triggers and how idiomatic meaning emerges from the interaction between language, cognition, and culture.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of English onomastic idioms demonstrates that proper names function as cognitively salient elements that structure idiomatic meaning rather than serving as mere lexical fillers. Within a cognitive-linguistic framework, proper names in idioms activate shared conceptual knowledge, including stereotypes, narratives, and culturally embedded evaluations. As a result, they facilitate rapid meaning construction and interpretation by triggering established mental representations (Langacker, 1991; Kövecses, 2010).

Proper names in idioms often undergo semantic generalization, losing their primary referential function and acquiring symbolic meaning. This process allows a name to stand for a type of person, situation, or quality, thereby contributing to the idiom's expressive and evaluative force. From a cognitive perspective, such names function as conceptual shortcuts that compress complex cultural information into a single lexical unit (Langlotz, 2006).

Anthroponyms constitute one of the most productive categories of onomastic idioms in English. Personal names such as *Tom*, *Dick*, and *Harry* are used to represent an undifferentiated group of ordinary people, illustrating the cognitive mechanism of

metonymy, where a typical individual stands for a whole class (Fernando, 1996). Similarly, expressions like ***a smart Alec*** employ a personal name to evoke stereotypical behavioral traits, relying on shared cultural assumptions.

Toponyms in idioms often evoke culturally or historically salient locations that serve as conceptual reference points. For instance, place names may symbolize centrality, remoteness, or excess, depending on culturally established associations. From a cognitive viewpoint, toponyms function as anchors for spatial and cultural frames, allowing abstract meanings to be grounded in concrete geographical imagery (Fillmore, 1982; Kövecses, 2010).

Mythological and biblical names form another significant group of onomastic idioms, drawing on widely known narratives and archetypal characters. Idioms containing such names rely on entrenched cultural schemas and collective memory, making their meanings highly conventionalized within the speech community. The interpretation of these idioms is largely dependent on the listener's familiarity with the underlying stories, which reinforces the role of shared cultural cognition in idiomatic meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Cultural Knowledge and Conceptualization in Meaning Formation

The analysis confirms that cultural knowledge plays a crucial role in the conceptualization of onomastic idioms. Idiomatic meanings emerge from the interaction between linguistic form and culturally grounded cognitive models. Cultural frames provide the background information necessary for interpreting proper names in idioms, including historical events, literary traditions, religious beliefs, and social stereotypes (Fillmore, 1982).

From a cognitive-semantic perspective, idioms containing proper names exemplify how language encodes collective experience and cultural values. The successful interpretation of such idioms presupposes access to shared conceptual

resources, which explains why onomastic idioms often pose difficulties for non-native speakers and translators. This observation supports the view that idiomatic meaning is not solely linguistic but deeply embedded in cultural cognition (Kövecses, 2010; Langlotz, 2006).

Overall, the findings highlight that proper names in idioms function as powerful conceptual tools that mediate between language, mind, and culture. Their cognitive role extends beyond naming, contributing to meaning formation through metaphorical, metonymic, and frame-based processes.

Implications

The findings of the present study contribute to cognitive linguistics by demonstrating that idiomatic meaning is strongly motivated by conceptual and cultural knowledge encoded in proper names. By applying a linguo-cognitive approach to English onomastic idioms, the study supports the view that idioms are not arbitrary linguistic units but conventionalized expressions grounded in general cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, and frame-based conceptualization (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010).

From the perspective of phraseology, the analysis highlights the functional significance of onomastic elements in idiom formation. Proper names emerge as cognitively salient components that activate shared mental representations and cultural models. This insight enriches existing classifications of idioms by emphasizing the semantic and cognitive role of onymic constituents, thereby extending traditional structural and semantic approaches to phraseological research (Fernando, 1996; Langlotz, 2006).

The results of the study also have important implications for language teaching and intercultural communication. Onomastic idioms often pose difficulties for learners of English due to their cultural specificity and reliance on background

knowledge. Understanding the cognitive and cultural motivation underlying such idioms can facilitate more effective teaching strategies that move beyond rote memorization toward conceptual explanation and contextualization (Boers, 2000).

In intercultural communication, awareness of the culturally embedded nature of onomastic idioms can help prevent misunderstanding and pragmatic failure. Since the interpretation of these idioms depends on shared cultural frames, speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds may interpret them differently or fail to recognize their idiomatic meaning altogether. Thus, incorporating linguo-cognitive insights into intercultural competence training can enhance communicative effectiveness and cultural sensitivity (Kövecses, 2010).

Conclusion

This article has examined English idiomatic expressions containing proper names from a linguo-cognitive perspective. The analysis has shown that proper names in idioms undergo semantic transformation, shifting from referential markers to symbolic and conceptual elements. Through mechanisms such as conceptual metaphor, metonymy, and cultural framing, onomastic components contribute directly to idiomatic meaning formation.

The study has demonstrated that anthroponyms, toponyms, and mythological or biblical names function as cognitive triggers that activate shared cultural knowledge and mental representations. As a result, idiomatic meaning emerges from the interaction between linguistic form, cognitive processes, and culturally grounded conceptual models.

The significance of proper names in idiomatic expressions lies in their ability to condense complex cultural and conceptual information into compact linguistic forms. Names enhance the expressiveness, memorability, and evaluative potential of idioms, making them powerful tools for meaning construction. From a

cognitive perspective, proper names serve as anchors that link language to collective experience and cultural identity, reinforcing the inseparability of language, mind, and culture.

Future research could expand the scope of this study by conducting comparative analyses of onomastic idioms across different languages and cultures, thereby identifying universal and culture-specific cognitive patterns. Further studies might also explore diachronic changes in the use and interpretation of onomastic idioms, as well as their processing in the minds of native and non-native speakers using experimental methods. Additionally, corpus-based quantitative approaches could provide deeper insight into frequency, variation, and contextual usage of onomastic idioms in contemporary English.

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