



Cultural Variability: conceptualization of life through idioms in defferent cultures

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Abstract

This study explores how idioms across diverse cultures reflect conceptualizations of life, revealing cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews. By analyzing idiomatic expressions in English, Chinese, Arabic, and Yoruba, we identify common themes and cultural-specific nuances in perceptions of life's purpose, challenges, and temporality. Findings suggest that idioms serve as linguistic mirrors of cultural cognition, with universal themes like resilience and fate coexisting alongside culture-specific metaphors rooted in historical and environmental contexts. This cross-cultural analysis underscores the role of language in shaping and expressing human experience.

Keywords: Idioms, cultural variability, conceptualization of life, cross-cultural linguistics, metaphor, worldview

Introduction

Language, as a repository of cultural knowledge, encodes how societies perceive and articulate fundamental concepts like life. Idioms—figurative expressions unique to linguistic communities—offer a window into these conceptualizations, blending metaphor, history, and cultural values. For instance, the English idiom “life is a journey” reflects a linear, goal-oriented worldview, while the Chinese “人生如梦” (life is like a dream) emphasizes transience and illusion, rooted in Taoist philosophy. Despite their ubiquity, idioms remain underexplored in cross-cultural studies of existential concepts.

This research addresses this gap by examining how idioms in different cultures conceptualize life, focusing on their thematic content, metaphorical structures, and cultural underpinnings. By comparing idiomatic expressions across linguistically and culturally distinct groups, we aim to uncover both universal and culture-specific patterns in how life is understood and articulated.

Relevance of Work

Understanding cultural variability in idioms has implications for linguistics, anthropology, and intercultural communication. Idioms are not mere linguistic



ornaments; they shape cognition and reflect societal priorities, influencing how individuals navigate life's challenges. This study contributes to:

Linguistic Theory: By analyzing idioms as cognitive metaphors, we advance conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Cultural Studies: The findings highlight how language preserves cultural identity and historical context.

Intercultural Competence: Insights into idiomatic meanings can reduce miscommunication in globalized settings, such as education, diplomacy, and business.

Education: Incorporating cultural idioms in language teaching fosters deeper cultural understanding.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate how idioms in English, Chinese, Arabic, and Yoruba conceptualize life, identifying shared themes and culture-specific differences. The research seeks to answer:

What are the dominant metaphors for life in each culture's idioms?

How do cultural values, histories, and environments shape these idiomatic expressions?

Are there universal themes in the conceptualization of life across these cultures?

Materials and Methods of Research

This qualitative study employs a comparative linguistic analysis of idioms from four languages: English, Chinese (Mandarin), Arabic, and Yoruba. These languages were selected for their cultural and linguistic diversity, representing Western, East Asian, Middle Eastern, and African contexts.

Data Collection

Corpus Development: Idioms were sourced from dictionaries, linguistic corpora (e.g., British National Corpus for English, Modern Chinese Corpus, Arabic Proverbs Collections), and native speaker consultations. For Yoruba, oral traditions and ethnographic texts were included due to limited written corpora.

Selection Criteria: Idioms explicitly referencing life, existence, or its attributes (e.g., purpose, duration, quality) were included. Approximately 50 idioms per language were analyzed.

Translation and Contextualization: Idioms were translated literally and figuratively, with cultural and historical contexts documented via literature reviews and expert interviews.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Idioms were categorized by dominant metaphors (e.g., journey, battle, dream) and themes (e.g., resilience, fate, temporality) using NVivo software.

Cross-Cultural Comparison: Patterns were compared across languages to identify universal and culture-specific elements.

Conceptual Metaphor Framework: Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory guided the analysis of metaphors, linking linguistic expressions to cognitive structures.

Ethical Considerations

Native speakers and cultural experts were consulted to ensure accurate interpretation and avoid misrepresentation. Data from oral traditions were collected with informed consent.

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed both universal and culture-specific patterns in how idioms conceptualize life.

Universal Themes

Life as a Struggle: Across all cultures, idioms depict life as a challenge requiring resilience. Examples include English "life is a battle," Chinese "人生如战场" (life is like a battlefield), Arabic "جهاد الحياة" (life is a struggle), and Yoruba "Aye l'oja" (life is a marketplace, implying competition).

Temporality: Life's fleeting nature is universal, as in English "life is short," Chinese "人生如白驹过隙" (life passes like a white colt), Arabic "ساعة الدنيا" (life is an hour), and Yoruba "Aye o gun" (life is not long).

Fate and Destiny: Idioms often attribute life's course to external forces, e.g., English "what's meant to be will be," Chinese "命由天定" (fate is decided by heaven), Arabic "مكتوب" (it is written), and Yoruba "Ayanmo ni" (it is destiny).

Culture-Specific Nuances

English: Idioms emphasize individuality and agency, e.g., "carve your own path" reflects a Western focus on self-determination.

Chinese: Rooted in Confucian and Taoist thought, idioms like "人生如戏" (life is like a play) highlight impermanence and social roles.

Arabic: Islamic influences dominate, with idioms like "امتحان الحياة" (life is a test) framing existence as a spiritual trial.

Yoruba: Idioms draw from communal and animistic traditions, e.g., “Aye l’egbe” (life is a collective) underscores community interdependence.

Cultural Influences

Historical Context: Arabic idioms reflect Islamic theology, while Yoruba idioms preserve pre-colonial oral traditions.

Environment: Yoruba’s marketplace metaphors (e.g., “Aye l’oja”) echo West Africa’s trading culture, while Chinese idioms often invoke nature (e.g., rivers, seasons).

Values: English idioms prioritize autonomy, Chinese emphasize harmony, Arabic focus on submission to divine will, and Yoruba highlight communal bonds.

Implications

These findings support conceptual metaphor theory, illustrating how idioms map abstract concepts like life onto concrete domains (e.g., journeys, battles). They also highlight the interplay of universal human experiences and cultural specificity, challenging assumptions of linguistic universality.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that idioms are powerful tools for understanding cultural conceptualizations of life. While universal themes like struggle, temporality, and fate emerge across English, Chinese, Arabic, and Yoruba, culture-specific metaphors reveal distinct worldviews shaped by history, religion, and environment. These insights enrich linguistic and cultural studies, offering practical applications in education and intercultural communication. Future research could expand to additional languages or explore idioms’ role in shaping individual cognition.

References

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