
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Iraqi EFL Learners' Recognition of House-Related Idioms: An Investigation of the Learners' Performance and Relevant Cultural Cognition Idiosyncrasies

Shahla Abdul Kadhim Hadi

College of Information Technology, University of Babylon, Babylon, Iraq

Corresponding Author: Shahla Abdul Kadhim Hadi, **E-mail:** shahla.jassim@uobabylon.edu.iq

| ABSTRACT

Iraqi EFL learners' recognition of meanings of house-related idioms has been investigated. The paper assumes that cultural idiosyncrasies related to the conceptual knowledge underlying the idiomatic expression may become obstacles to learners' recognition of the correct interpretation, while having conceptual knowledge similar to that of the target will do the opposite. A multiple-choice test was adopted, and the learners were asked to choose an idiom's accurate meaning out of four-meaning options provided for each of the ten sentences of the test. The analysis highlights the role of conventional knowledge in patterning learners' thinking. It also foregrounds some learners' tendency to literalism by mapping from one physical domain to another one, which can be an analogy of the preliminary step of the universal mechanism of humans' mental conceptualization that widens and matures through interaction to cover abstract domains of human existence. It is also found that it is the immediate dynamic cultural knowledge rather than knowledge due to cultural membership, which governs individuals' thinking and guides their choices.

| KEYWORDS

Cognitive semantics, conceptualization, metaphor, source domain, target domain

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Conceptual metaphor theory is one of the pioneer theories in cognitive semantics, which highlights the relation between language, cognition, and experience. It clearly states that metaphor is not only a stylistic literary device. Rather, it is a fundamental component of the human communication system. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) clarified that we mentally approach details of everyday life metaphorically and that metaphor is central to humans' understanding of themselves and the world they are involved in. It enables humans to create the non-physical worlds which constitute the various conceptual domains (social, psychological, political, etc.) of our interactional world (Kövecses, 2015).

The relation between human experiences, conceptual system, and semantic structure of linguistic expressions is the key concern of Cognitive Semantics which views the semantic structure as a form of linguistic encoding and externalizing the conceptual structure, and those lexical items are, in fact, lexical concepts; each of which is a mental unit of knowledge that is formed and modified by individuals' experiences (Evans, 2007). Human cognition stores details of various experiences in mental spaces, which are built up continuously as a must for comprehending the interactive world people are involved in (Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Palmer (1996), Kövecses (2010) Sharifian (2009, 2011, 2016). Then, associations between entities in various mental spaces are fetched and made tangible through words and linguistic expressions, allowing new meanings to be construed. Hadi (2017a) clarified this notion by highlighting the correspondence between the various senses of the lexical concept of EYE. She stated that this concept prompts the association between the curved rounded shape of EYE and the shape of the metal piece we use to fasten the edges of a garment together; giving rise to a new meaning associated with the 'eye' referent (the organ on human face) in a sentence like " It fastens with a hook and eye"(Hornby, 2004, p. 445).

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The number of cross-correspondences is not a closed-ended class as the potential pairings can be endless and applicable across different domains' details. This allows the maximum range of possible pairings between source and target domains where every 'basic level instance' is loaded with information (Lakoff, 2006). In spite of the infinite number of mappings that can arise, mental representation and conceptualization are embodied in nature. Our perception and representation of the world are highly determined and affected by the nature of our bodies and neurological system. We are able to form mental representations only for things that are part of our interactional world and the ones that we can perceive (Evans & Green, 2006). In fact, concepts constructed from human-embodied experiences are highly affected by the way individuals see the world (Hadi, 2017b). Littlemore (2019: 222) emphasized this aspect by stating that "The sociocultural setting mediates individuals' perception and thinking and plays an essential role in shaping metaphors."

Actually, conceptualization is not a reflection of objective characteristics of the world. People's experiential life, their thinking, their cultural backgrounds, and the interactive local and global context of conceptualization are all various sources for concepts' construction (Kövecses (2005), (2015), Harder, 2010). Among all these sources, cultural and cognitive mental processing have a more primary role than bodily experience in creating metaphors (Kovecses, 2010)

Metaphorical extensions of words and expressions are actually neither arbitrary nor purely linguistic matters (Hadi, 2017c). They are reflections of concepts that individuals have chosen to represent and communicate to make details of experiences clear and comprehensible for their interlocutors (Quinn, 1997).

The systematism of language patterning left no room for the possibility of the traditional view that idiomatic expressions are a fixed package of meanings used by language natives (Sinclair, 1991). Actually, these expressions are outcomes of a conceptual system that arises from humans' conventional knowledge of their world, the common view of the various experiences and details that individuals have due to being involved in the same interactional settings. Accordingly, the meaning of those expressions is not detached from the cultural knowledge which patterns our conceptual knowledge of our interactive world. Kövecses and Szabo (1996) indicated that speakers use idioms to communicate various content messages by selecting and focusing on links between various domains. This paper aims to highlight the conceptual content underlying the metaphorical meanings of house idiomatic expressions and investigate the EFL learners' ability to recognize these meanings in an attempt to trace the role of the cultural conceptual system in causing divergence in meaning comprehension.

2. Literature Review

A lot of research work investigates the metaphorical base of idiomatic expressions. Gibbs (2003) clarifies that the association between an individual's reaction to psychological pressure like stress and the physical symptoms appearing on that individual in the form of an increase in blood pressure or high body temperature has prompted the metaphor that anger is a heated fluid in a container. This metaphor motivates idiomatic expressions like *blow off steam*, *hit the ceiling*, and *hot under the collar*.

The familiarity with the source and the target domains as a condition for mental association and meaning construction has also been investigated. Callies (2011) studied patterns of use and variation of idioms related to sports in five national English varieties. His study showed that there is a significant difference in the prevailing of certain sports idioms in English varieties. Baseball-related idioms are frequent in American, British, and Australian Varieties as opposed to the rare frequency of cricket-related idioms. The study also recorded the productive use of football-related idioms in all varieties. He found that the prominence of football-related expressions like (V the ball rolling, V the goalposts, play it safe) in all varieties is not only due to the popularity of that sport there but also because these expressions have certain components represented by some similar devices used in the actual sports field that is shared with all sports under study. The rarity of cricket-based expressions like (V a straight bat, hit for six, good innings) in Indian and south African English in spite of the popularity of this sport in some parts of this country may indicate the need for more intense contact extension to allow more productivity as the knowledge income about the source, and the target domains will be greater.

It has turned out that idioms are a problematic area for learners of English as the overall meaning of an idiom is unpredictable from the meaning of its constituents, as culture is essential in patterning that meaning. Asri and Rochmawati (2017) consequently call for novel methods for teaching idioms to learners of English to raise their awareness of these expressions and enable them to deal with challenges that can stem from their cultural literacy. The suggested methods can encompass a number of strategies like creating conversations where learners are involved in dealing with idiomatic expressions in various situations, integrating idioms into writing skills, and making use of authentic material like idioms in newspaper articles, songs, TV shows, and internet websites, employing problem-solving activities where learners' cognitive abilities are prompted to trace the association or disassociation between the concepts in the native language and their counterparts in the target language, and finally using posters as an instructional tool to provide meanings and definitions of idioms besides sentences examples to enhance learners' ability to recall them. Asri and Rochmawati believed that these strategies would raise the learners' performance in using idioms.

Bataineh and Al -Shaikili (2020) conducted a cognitive analysis of a set of body part idioms in English and colloquial Jordanian Arabic. The analysis turned out that some idioms have similar semantic content in the two languages. For example, a head idiom like 'get your head around something' is an expression of determination in English, and this is the same element of meaning in the Jordanian idiom "حط راسه بشغلة" (literal translation: put his head in something). Other examples of body-part idioms involve "قريب للقلب" (literal translation: close to heart), 'كل العيون علي' (literal translation: all eyes on me), and "خلى دمه يغلي" ((literal translation: blood boils) where love and care, attention and anger are the concepts communicated via these idioms in the two languages. The researchers attributed the similar conceptualization of these idioms to the common exponential grounds and hence conventional knowledge of speakers. While other idioms like "حط ايدك على قلبك" (literal translation: put your hand on your heart) show divergent concepts in the two languages were putting the hand on one's heart signals, fear in Arabic Jordanian but telling the truth or honesty in English. This difference is due to cultural idiosyncrasies.

3. Research Questions

1. Do EFL learners recognize the systematic correlation between the semantics of idioms and the concepts they encode?
2. How does cultural cognition affect learners' recognition of the meanings of idioms under consideration?

4. Procedure

4.1. Sample of Analysis

A total of 52 students of EFL learners from the university of Babylon participated in the study. All are third-stage students, and they use to memorize meanings of idioms occurring in their various topics rather than analyzing them cognitively or culturally. Their attention has not been drawn to the cultural basis that underlined the meaning formation of idioms, and they did not receive any lectures about the cognitive thinking mechanisms involved in language use.

4.2. Instrument

The instrument of analysis was a test consisting of ten English sentences; each sentence involved the use of a house-idiom followed by four interpretations. Some idiomatic expressions have a direct conceptual equivalent in learners' culture while others do not (a more detailed explanation is provided in the discussion of results). Participants are asked to choose the option that best expresses the meaning intended by that expression. The responses are then examined and analyzed to figure out some relevant results.

4.3. Method of Analysis

A mixed method of analysis was adopted in this study. The qualitative analysis involves a theoretical explanation of the participants' responses and a description of the cultural motives expected to affect their choices. This encompasses tracing the association between the source and the target domains from the English speakers' perspectives as compared to its counterpart due to the Participants' cultural cognition. The quantitative analysis covers the calculation of frequencies and percentages of subjects' responses as a way to draw more relevant inferences.

The participants were presented with ten house idioms that communicate ten different concepts. Their duty was to choose which one out of the four given interpretation options was correct. Idioms and their accurate interpretation are italicized in each prompt.

5. Results

Table (1) shows the frequencies and percentages of the subjects' responses:

N	Prompts	Options	Frequencies	Percentage
1	My parents would put me in the house of the dog if I kept my bedroom as messy as yours.	<i>a. big trouble.</i>	17	32.7%
		b. Everything is going my way.	1	1.9%
		c. a place where a dog lives	30	57.7%
		d. allowing a dog to bite me	4	7.7%
2	The business is like a house of cards in the present political and economic situations.	a. a place where people can gamble.	13	25%
		b. playing with cards.	8	15.3%
		<i>c. weak situation of the business.</i>	7	13.5%
		d. a building in poor conditions	24	46.2%
3	Sorry about the delay with your food. The desert is on the house.	a. It is left in-house and not available now.	20	38.5%
		<i>b. It is for free as an apology for late service.</i>	21	40.4%
		c. It will be offered soon.	9	17.3%
		d. You already have some dessert at home.	2	3.8%
4	They get on like a house on fire.	A house that is burning.	20	38.5%
		<i>A very good relationship.</i>	15	28.8%
		having arguments	7	13.5%

		the fast arrival at the house	10	19.2%
5	Lloyd Webber's new musical brought the house down.	<i>Successful event.</i>	19	36.6%
		Music being at house.	5	9.6%
		failed event	10	19.2%
		house destruction.	18	34.6%
6	This shaky old bridge is actually as safe as houses.	<i>a. safety.</i>	25	48.1%
		b. unsafety.	6	11.6%
		c. similarity.	19	36.5%
		d. shakiness.	2	3.8%
7	He's got his house in order and made some tremendous discussions	a. arranging the pieces of furniture.	10	19.2%
		<i>b. arranging affairs and solving problems.</i>	29	55.8%
		c. Putting a house on a list of things to be discussed.	8	15.4%
		d. going home to make some decisions.	5	9.6%
8	People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.	a. easy damage by a stone.	10	19.2%
		b. Houses made of glass	24	46.2%
		<i>c. peoples' faults and imperfections</i>	17	32.7%
		d. unpractical situations	1	1.9%
9	I wouldn't give house room to that lamp. It's terrible.	<i>a. give space to something</i>	25	48 %
		b. rent a room in the house	6	11.5%
		c. give a part of the house to someone	18	34.6%
		d. buying something for the house	3	5.8%
10	It is becoming more difficult for people to get a foot on the housing ladder.	a. moving on a ladder in one's house.	10	19.2%
		<i>b. Buying a house as the first step to buying a bigger one.</i>	17	32.7%
		c. stabilizing one's feet on the ladder.	19	36.5%
		d. Putting house affairs on a list of responsibilities	6	11.6%

Table (1) Frequencies and Percentages of the Subjects' Responses

The table shows that the correct interpretations and the literal translations of expressions alternate in occupying the first and second highest percentages among all other options for all the test items. The only exception is the expression (house of cards) in the second item, where the correct interpretation recorded the lowest percentage. This means that some learners (not all of them) are able to recognize the relation between idioms and concepts they encode, which answers the first question in this study. The analysis of responses in the next item will answer the second question.

6. Discussion of Results

The correct responses were the highest for items (5,6,7,9) as the concepts conveyed by the idiomatic expressions have conceptual equivalents in the learners' native language. For example 'brought the house down' and 'put your house in order' in 5 and 7 have equivalent concepts communicated in a similar way in Iraqi dialect 'كسر الدنيا': destroy the world" / 'رتب وضعك': arrange your affairs" to indicate the success of something and arranging one's affair to solve problems; respectively. Learners are attracted to the correct option by correlating their conventional knowledge of the metaphorical meaning of the Arabic expression ('destroy the world(literal translation)): (كسر الدنيا) in their mother tongue with the employment of "brought the house down" in the English sentence. The same thing can be said about 'as safe as a house' and 'give a house room to' in items 6 and 9, where the universal image of one's house as a place of safety and privacy gives rise to the selection of correct options represented by concepts of safety and devoting a place for something. Of Course, the constituent elements of these idioms are another contributor to the high percentage of correctness as the semantic content communicated by 'as safe as in and 'give room to' can be directly associated with the conceptual content they represent; that is the conceptual content is transparent in each of these expressions.

Responses to idioms in (1, 4, 8 and 10) occupied the second-highest correct choices. The idiom 'put someone in the house of the dog' has a relevant concept in Iraqi colloquial speech 'حصرة الكلب بالجامع' (literal translation: like a dog besieged in a mosque) where a man in trouble is likened to a dog enters a mosque when its doors are opened for prayer but fails to get out before they are closed again by the end of the religious rite, so it is besieged inside the building and has to wait until the doors are opened again. The overall image is a conceptualization of being captive in trouble. A colloquial expression "the first step on the stair/ the road: اول السلم/ الطريق" is used in Iraqi Arabic variation to indicate that there are further steps to be followed to get to the eventual goal. The meaning of the English expression 'get a foot on the housing ladder' involves that there are further steps to get a prospective house in the future. The projection of the natives' mental image on the expression of the target language in specific examples demands some further mental efforts to trace the associations and figure out the intended message, as there is no direct one-to-one correspondence between the Arabic wording of the image and the English one in addition to the fact that some Arabic idioms like (to be on the stair head: (في اول السلم) can be seen as a generic mental category which involves all situations that

encompass gradual steps to get a destination. Moving the learners' attention from the general category image in their own cultural and mental repertoire to some specific sample (represented by buying a house) from the target cultural cognition requires more mental detection of associations. This can justify the fact that the correctness of responses for these items records the second highest percentage.

By the same token, correct responses to "house on fire" occur as a second choice as compared to options of the literal translation of this expression which comes as the first chosen option. The reason can also be attributed to the indirect correlations that have to be traced and figured out by the learners. The concept of fire in Iraqi variation symbolizes not only negative things like quarreling and stress but also positive things like cleverness and attractiveness in general and sexual attraction in particular. Learners have to navigate all these concepts in their mental repertoire, which is determined and patterned by their own culture, to discover the relevant one that most fits the message in the target language. It seems that the majority of learners try to get rid of their confusion about which concept most fits the English expression by resorting to the literal translation of idioms' constituent elements; which justifies the occurrence of options with literal meanings at the top of responses to items 1,4 and 10 with percentages of (57.7%, 38.5%, 36.5%) respectively. This answers the second question of this study, as the cultural peculiarity related to an expression may harden the learners' task of choosing the correct interpretation.

Item 8 has attracted the researcher's attention as the literal Arabic translation of the expression 'بيت من زجاج' (literal translation: glass house) is used with exactly the same image, that of imperfection, in standard Arabic. However, the percentage of correct responses occupies the second rank among the percentages for each of the other options. It seems that some learners (32.7%) were focusing on their colloquial speech while making their choices; which indicates that they think in line with their immediate local Iraqi environment so that images related to this culture represent the better choice for them as compared to those related to their wide-domain Arab culture.

The idiom 'house of cards' in the second item, 'The business is like a house of cards in the present political and economic situations,' recorded the least percentage (13.5%) of correct responses not only for this item but also among all the correct responses for all other test items. It seems that the participants' minds tend to call the physical image of a house and project its properties on another physical entity (i.e., a building) without extending the semantic content to some abstract domains. Actually, choosing 'a building in poor condition' as the interpretation of 'house of cards' by the majority of participants can be a reflection of an earlier stage of mental mapping where humans seek associations between physical entities in their interactional world as a first step out of which further metaphorical meanings have arisen.

As for the third item, correct responses and literal translation of 'the desert is on the house' show almost similar frequencies (21 and 20 responses, 40.4% and 38.5%, respectively). The structure 'on + a noun' where a noun referent can be a host person or a host establishment(a restaurant, a shop, etc.) is widely used in Iraqi variation as it is a part of the Iraqi culture to use this expression whenever individuals receive pay for any sort of service. It is a means of showing attachment and pertinence in Arab culture, and its roots can belong to Arab tradition where those in the custody of a person are paid for by that person, and the context of its use extended over time to other areas to involve compliment by those who offer any kind of service. As for the English idiom "on the house," it was originally used in business, particularly in saloons that served the first drink for free as a sort of merchandise; then, this idiom started to be used in restaurants and other establishments that advertise for their freebies services. It is thus a business tool that calls customers to try products. The different cultural origins and conventions related to each expression took some learners away from the 'for free' option, which is more relevant to the business domain.

Some learners' options indicate that they focus on some sentence elements to composite the semantics of the idiomatic expressions. For example, they rely on their knowledge that the structure 'as an adjective' expresses similarity when they choose 'similarity' and 'shakiness' as the meaning of 'as safe as houses'; they also seem to be attracted by 'down' in the expression 'brought the house down' to choose failed event as the suitable interpretation of the idiom; relying on the negative connotation associated with being down in our experiential world. The word 'order' in 'got his house in order' leads learners to make 'put a house on a list' as the meaning that best fits the semantics of this idiom; relying on the conventional knowledge related to the concept of arrangement where things are put in a hierarchy in terms of priority, importance, or even logic of sequencing. These instances show that learners create some source domains depending on some linguistic elements according to their own thinking rather than due to the conventions of the target language.

7. Conclusion

The study comes up with the following conclusions:

1. Some learners are able to recognize the meaning of the English idiomatic expression when it has a direct equivalent in terms of wording, conceptualization, and context of usage in their native language. Differences between the two languages in some or all

of these aspects are found to hinder or hold up learners' ability to recognize the accurate meaning of idioms, increasing the low level performance of learners who tend to adopt literal translation as the best option.

2. The learners' responses also ensure that their conceptualization is affected by their immediate local culture more than their wide-domain Arab culture. They were able to pick up the correct meaning of an idiom when it has an equivalent in their colloquial speech as Iraqi citizens, while idioms that are common in standard Arabic; which is a component and a reflection of Arab culture in general, including all its nationalities, cannot guide the majority of learners toward the correct option. This means that the micro-local cognition of Iraqi Participants was controlling conceptualization more than their macro collective cognition as Arab people.

3. It is a common scene that learners of English commit to literalism whenever they face a challenging meaning as they develop data based conceptualization (rather than schema based conceptualization). It seems that an English word evokes an Arabic schema of the relevant physical referent and its associated details which are taken by the learners as a source domain whose properties are projected on the target domain represented by the English idiom regardless of the different target cultural backgrounds and different associated schemas; which decreases the percentages of correct responses. What is interesting regarding this tendency of the participants is that their ways of processing literal meanings reflect what can be described as an early phase of conceptualization as a universal mechanism where individuals naturally map from some physical source domain to a physical target domain, and it is the cultural factors which enliven or deny the newly created concept whose content can go beyond the physical domain. This outcome emphasizes the importance of raising cultural awareness through teaching by clarifying the associations between various topics and the cultural background related to them. It will also be beneficial for learners to get feedback and explanations about their responses to get native-like conceptualization.

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