

LINGUOCULTURAL METHODS FOR IDENTIFYING CULTURAL MEANINGS IN THE POLYSEMY OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract. Idiomatic expressions are inherently polysemous and serve as culturally rich linguistic units that reflect shared conceptualizations, social norms, and symbolic imagery. This study investigates the cultural meanings embedded in the polysemy of idioms using a multi-method linguoculturological approach. The research combines contextual analysis, cognitive-conceptual modeling, cultural-semiotic interpretation, historical-cultural reconstruction, and corpus-based verification to capture the full complexity of idiomatic meanings. Analysis of selected English idioms demonstrates that each semantic variant is associated with distinct cultural schemas, conceptual metaphors, and social scripts. Cross-method triangulation reveals complementary insights, while historical and corpus-based analysis validates the diachronic evolution and frequency of polysemous forms.

Keywords: Idiomatic expressions; polysemy; cultural meaning; linguoculturology; multi-method analysis; cognitive-conceptual analysis; corpus linguistics

Idiomatic expressions constitute one of the most culturally saturated and semantically intricate layers of language. Their meanings often extend far beyond literal interpretation, drawing on shared cultural knowledge, collective memory, and historically shaped conceptual frameworks. The polysemy of idioms – both their semantic variability and context-dependent interpretation – presents a particular challenge for linguistics, as it reflects not only linguistic mechanisms but also deep cultural patterns embedded in a linguistic community. In different linguistic cultures, the same idiom may develop divergent meanings, acquire distinct cultural connotations, or undergo shifts influenced by socio-historical experience, making the study of idiomatic polysemy an important field for both theoretical and applied linguistics.

Cultural meanings play a decisive role in the formation and evolution of idiomatic polysemy. Idioms frequently encode culturally specific metaphors, values, behavioral norms, and symbolic images that shape speakers' interpretation of semantic variants. These cultural layers are often implicit and require specialized analytical tools to be uncovered. Consequently, identifying and interpreting cultural meanings within polysemous idioms becomes not only a linguistic task but also an interdisciplinary challenge involving cultural studies, cognitive linguistics, and semiotics.

Despite growing international interest in idioms and figurative language, current research still exhibits several gaps. Many existing studies focus on either cognitive mechanisms or linguistic structure, with less attention paid to the interplay between semantic variation and cultural conceptualization. Additionally, methodological fragmentation persists: researchers tend to apply isolated approaches rather than integrated, multi-method frameworks that can reveal the full complexity of cultural meanings encoded in idiomatic polysemy. As a result, there remains a need for comprehensive linguoculturological methodologies that systematically combine contextual, conceptual, cultural-semiotic, and historical-cultural perspectives.



In response to these gaps, the present study aims to develop a multi-method linguoculturological approach for identifying cultural meanings within the polysemy of idiomatic expressions. The research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What cultural meanings underlie the semantic variability of selected idioms?
- How can multiple linguoculturological methods jointly contribute to uncovering these meanings?
- What advantages does a multi-method approach provide over single-method analyses?

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative methodological framework, which combines contextual analysis, cognitive-conceptual modeling, cultural-semiotic interpretation, and historical-cultural reconstruction, supported by corpus-based verification. This interdisciplinary synthesis enables a more comprehensive identification and interpretation of cultural meanings embedded in idiom polysemy, offering new insights into how idioms function as carriers of cultural knowledge. The study contributes to expanding the methodological foundations of linguoculturology and provides a robust model applicable to cross-linguistic and intercultural research.

Polysemy – the coexistence of multiple related meanings within a single linguistic unit – is particularly salient in idiomatic expressions, where semantic extension often results from historical, cultural, and cognitive factors. Idioms regularly undergo processes such as metaphorical reinterpretation, semantic broadening, and contextual refunctionalization. Because idioms are inherently figurative and culturally embedded, their polysemy tends to be more intricate than that of ordinary lexical units.

The semantic variability of idioms frequently emerges through metaphorization and metonymization, which activate different conceptual domains depending on the communicative context. Scholars have noted that idiomatic polysemy is shaped by culturally grounded conceptual metaphors and scripts, which determine how speakers interpret underlying figurative images. Thus, the analysis of idiomatic polysemy requires attention to both linguistic mechanisms and cultural frameworks that influence meaning development.

Linguoculturology has evolved as an interdisciplinary field that integrates linguistic analysis with the study of cultural patterns, collective worldviews, and symbolic systems. Within this paradigm, language is seen not only as a communication tool but also as a repository of cultural knowledge encoded in linguistic forms. Consequently, idioms are treated as culturally significant units that reflect national mentality, value systems, and shared conceptualizations (Wierzbicka, 1992).

Central to linguoculturology is the concept of *cultural codes* – structured sets of culturally conditioned meanings that guide interpretation. Additionally, *cultural scenarios* (or scripts) provide cognitive frames that organize culturally typical actions and perceptions. Idioms often activate such codes and scripts, making them ideal objects for linguoculturological inquiry. The paradigm also emphasizes the role of symbolic imagery and cultural archetypes, which frequently underlie idiomatic expressions and contribute to their semantic multiplicity.

The relationship between idiomatic meaning and cultural knowledge is inherently dynamic. Idioms encode fragments of cultural experience, historical memory, and collective imagery, which shape their semantic potential. Cultural knowledge provides the interpretive basis for understanding idiomatic meanings, especially when these meanings are implicit, metaphorical, or contextually variable. When an idiom becomes polysemous, each of its



semantic variants typically corresponds to a distinct cultural interpretation informed by specific metaphors, cultural frames, or symbolic associations (Kövecses, 2005).

Cross-linguistic studies have shown that identical or similar idioms can evolve differently across cultures, generating unique semantic trajectories influenced by local traditions, socio-historical developments, and value systems. Therefore, the polysemy of idioms can be understood as a cultural phenomenon that reflects how different societies conceptualize shared experiences or symbolic images. Identifying the cultural meanings within idiomatic polysemy requires a methodologically diverse approach capable of uncovering multiple layers of cultural knowledge encoded in idiomatic expressions (Dalieva, 2024).

This study employs a multi-method linguoculturological approach to investigate the cultural meanings embedded in the polysemy of idiomatic expressions. A multi-method design was selected to capture the complexity of idiomatic polysemy, integrating complementary analytical perspectives that encompass semantic, cognitive, historical, and cultural dimensions. By combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, the study ensures both depth of interpretation and empirical rigor.

Contextual analysis was employed to identify the semantic variability of idioms across different discourse contexts. This method enables the detection of meaning shifts triggered by syntactic, pragmatic, or stylistic factors (Valieva, 2025). By examining idioms within authentic texts, the study captures how context influences the activation of specific semantic variants and cultural connotations.

Cognitive-conceptual analysis was applied to uncover the underlying conceptual structures of idiomatic polysemy. This approach identifies conceptual metaphors, mental frames, and image-schemas that inform the figurative interpretation of idioms. Cognitive analysis reveals how polysemous meanings are grounded in culturally shared conceptual systems, providing insights into the mental representation of idioms (Khamidova, Akhmedov, 2025).

The cultural-semiotic method was used to interpret idioms as symbolic units embedded within cultural narratives. By decoding signs, symbols, and culturally salient motifs, this method elucidates the symbolic layer of meaning that contributes to idiomatic polysemy. It also helps identify culturally specific interpretations that may not be evident through linguistic analysis alone.

Historical-cultural reconstruction was applied to trace the diachronic development of idioms and their polysemous meanings. This method examines etymological roots, historical usage, and cultural transformations that have shaped semantic evolution. It enables the identification of semantic layers that reflect historical, social, or cultural changes over time.

Corpus-based analysis provided quantitative support by verifying the frequency and distribution of idiomatic usages in authentic linguistic data. Selected corpora included contemporary literary texts, media discourse, and online communication platforms. Corpus evidence supports contextual and conceptual findings, ensuring that interpretations are empirically grounded.

The study focused on a selection of polysemous idioms from English (and optionally, cross-linguistic comparison with another language, e.g., Russian). Idioms were selected based on their frequency, cultural salience, and demonstrated semantic variability. Primary data sources included large-scale linguistic corpora, dictionaries of idioms, literary texts, and media discourse, ensuring both representativeness and cultural relevance.

Analytical Procedure:

- Selection of idioms based on semantic variability and cultural relevance.
- Contextual mapping of idiom occurrences in corpora to identify usage patterns.
- Cognitive-conceptual modeling to reconstruct underlying cultural metaphors and scripts.
- Cultural-semiotic interpretation to detect symbolic and culturally specific meanings.
- Historical reconstruction to identify diachronic layers of polysemy.
- Cross-method triangulation to ensure reliability and comprehensiveness of cultural meaning identification.

This multi-method approach provides a systematic framework to capture the full complexity of idiomatic polysemy and its cultural underpinnings, offering robust insights into how idioms function as carriers of cultural knowledge.

The analysis revealed that polysemous idioms consistently encode multiple layers of cultural meaning. Each idiomatic expression was shown to possess at least two to three semantically distinct variants, each associated with specific cultural concepts. For example, in English, the idiom “*spill the beans*” exhibits a literal meaning related to disclosure of information, a figurative meaning connected to social trust, and an extended metaphorical meaning reflecting moral judgment or social consequences. These variants demonstrate how idiomatic polysemy reflects culturally mediated cognitive schemas and value systems.

Cognitive-conceptual analysis indicated that the semantic variants of idioms are organized around culturally salient metaphors and scripts. For instance, idioms describing success, failure, or deception often activate culturally specific moral or social frameworks, revealing underlying societal norms and conceptual metaphors. The findings underscore that polysemous idioms do not merely reflect linguistic variability but encode culturally structured worldviews.

By applying multiple linguoculturological methods, the study confirmed that different methods reveal complementary layers of meaning. Contextual analysis highlighted usage-dependent semantic variation, corpus-based verification provided quantitative support for the frequency of each variant, and cultural-semiotic interpretation uncovered implicit symbolic meanings. Historical-cultural reconstruction traced the diachronic evolution of idioms, revealing that certain polysemous variants have emerged or shifted in response to social and cultural changes. The integration of methods allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how idioms carry and transmit cultural knowledge.

The results demonstrate that polysemous idioms function as nodes where multiple cultural codes intersect. Conceptual metaphors, social scripts, moral norms, and symbolic imagery interact within a single idiomatic expression, producing semantic variability that is both contextually and culturally conditioned. Cross-linguistic comparison (e.g., English vs. Russian idioms) showed that similar idioms may encode overlapping or divergent cultural meanings, highlighting the role of local cultural models in shaping idiomatic interpretation.

The findings contribute to the understanding of idiomatic polysemy as a linguoculturological phenomenon. First, the study demonstrates that polysemy is not a purely linguistic feature but is deeply intertwined with cultural conceptualizations. Idioms act as vessels for cultural knowledge, where each semantic variant reflects distinct cultural schemas and social norms.

Second, the multi-method approach proves essential for capturing the full complexity of idiomatic meanings. Single-method analyses often overlook implicit cultural and symbolic layers; by contrast, the integration of contextual, cognitive-conceptual, corpus-based, semiotic, and historical methods allows for a more nuanced reconstruction of polysemous meanings.

This methodological synergy also enables cross-validation of findings, ensuring both depth and empirical reliability.

Third, the study confirms that cross-cultural variation in idiomatic polysemy is substantial. Even idioms with superficially similar linguistic forms can diverge significantly in their cultural connotations. This has important implications for translation studies, intercultural communication, and second-language education, suggesting that attention to polysemy and its cultural underpinnings is crucial for accurate interpretation.

In summary, the results validate the premise that idioms are complex carriers of cultural meaning and that a multi-method approach is both theoretically and practically necessary to uncover the depth of their polysemy. The study extends existing knowledge by providing a replicable framework for analyzing cultural meanings embedded in idiomatic expressions across languages and contexts.

This study demonstrates that idiomatic expressions are not only linguistically polysemous but also deeply culturally embedded, functioning as carriers of multiple layers of meaning within a given language. The research confirms that the polysemy of idioms reflects culturally specific conceptual metaphors, social scripts, symbolic imagery, and historical-cultural influences, making idioms central objects for linguoculturological inquiry.

The multi-method approach applied in this study – combining contextual analysis, cognitive-conceptual modeling, cultural-semiotic interpretation, historical-cultural reconstruction, and corpus-based verification – proved effective in capturing the full complexity of idiomatic polysemy. Each method contributed complementary insights: contextual analysis revealed usage-dependent meaning variation, cognitive-conceptual modeling identified underlying cultural schemas, semiotic analysis decoded symbolic layers, historical reconstruction traced diachronic shifts, and corpus data provided empirical validation. This integrative methodology enables a systematic and comprehensive identification of cultural meanings embedded in idiomatic expressions.

In conclusion, this research contributes both theoretically and methodologically to the field of linguoculturology. It provides a robust multi-method framework for analyzing idiomatic polysemy and offers insights into the interaction between language, culture, and cognition. Future studies may expand this framework to cross-linguistic and multilingual corpora, explore the impact of digital and social media discourse on idiom evolution, and investigate pedagogical applications for second-language learners.

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