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## BEYOND LITERAL INTERPRETATIONS: EXPLORING THE CULTURAL AND COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS OF ENGLISH BODY PARTS IDIOMS

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The present study aims at unraveling the deep cultural and cognitive dimensions embedded within English idioms that relate to body parts. Through a systematic analysis of a comprehensive corpus compiled from diverse sources such as dictionaries and websites, it scrutinizes not only the literal interpretations of these idioms but also their socio-cultural significance and cognitive underpinnings. The findings highlighted the solid interplay between language, culture, and cognition, shedding light on how these body parts idiomatic expressions reflect and shape socio-cultural norms and cognitive processes. These idioms are revealed to be more than mere linguistic quirks; they serve as conduits for conveying shared experiences and cultural heritage. The findings of the present study not only enrich our understanding of language and culture but also offer practical implications for English as a foreign language education and cross-cultural communication. The insights gained from this investigation contribute to various fields, such as linguistics, cultural studies, cognitive science, and language education.

**Keywords:** *body parts idioms, cultural dimensions, cognitive dimensions, figurative meaning, societal values.*

### Introduction

Language serves as a mirror reflecting the values, beliefs, and norms of a culture, and idiomatic expressions provide a unique glimpse into the complexities of language and the societies they represent. Among these expressions, body parts idioms hold a special place, deeply entrenched in English language and culture. They not only offer linguistic intrigue but also carry profound cultural significance, shedding light on human psychology. Langacker (1987) notes that idioms act as windows into the cultural soul of a language, with body parts idioms serving as

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rich repositories of cultural symbolism, encapsulating a society's collective experiences, heritage, and worldview.

With this understanding, the present study embarks on a comprehensive exploration of English body parts idioms, aiming to unravel their usage, meanings, and cultural significance. By delving into these idiomatic expressions, the study seeks to deepen our comprehension of the intricate interplay between language, culture, and cognition, ultimately facilitating more effective intercultural communication. The central inquiry revolves around whether the significance of these idioms lies in providing insights into people's experiences and their perception of the world around them.

The research questions probe into the factors contributing to the complexity of understanding English body parts idioms and the specific cultural, cognitive, and communicative information they convey. This study holds substantial significance as it not only enriches our understanding of the relationship between language and culture but also aids in effective communication and language learning. Moreover, by analyzing body parts idioms, we gain insights into historical and cultural contexts, contributing to the preservation of linguistic heritage and promoting cross-cultural understanding. This study attempts to answer the following question:

1. What factors lead to the difficulty in comprehending English body parts idioms?
2. What information do English body parts idioms communicate regarding culture, cognition, and communication?

### **Definition of idioms**

Idioms are phrases or expressions with meanings that go beyond their literal interpretations (Goatly, 1997). Instead, they carry symbolic or figurative significance that may differ from the individual words' literal meanings. These linguistic constructs are deeply rooted in culture and have evolved within specific language communities. According to Wierzbicka (2006), idioms typically rely on metaphors, symbolism, or cultural references to convey nuanced messages or ideas. In simpler terms, idioms are phrases in language that mean more than what the words literally say.

### **Significance of idioms in language and communication**

Idioms hold profound significance in language and communication, offering various benefits that enrich interactions and expressions. Firstly, according to Gibbs and Colston (2012), they enhance expressiveness by adding depth, color, and vividness to language, enabling speakers to succinctly convey complex ideas or

emotions. Through evocative imagery, idioms create a stronger impact in communication, making conversations more engaging and memorable. Secondly, they serve as windows into cultural understanding, reflecting the values, beliefs, and experiences of specific language communities. They carry cultural nuances and references that provide insights into a culture's history, customs, and thought patterns. Furthermore, idioms facilitate efficient communication by encapsulating concepts or situations concisely. They also enable speakers to convey nuanced meanings, adding layers of humor, sarcasm, or irony, and can serve as a form of coded language within certain groups, fostering a sense of exclusivity or shared understanding (Goatly, 1997). Moreover, using idioms appropriately helps build rapport with native speakers, demonstrating familiarity and understanding of the language and its cultural expressions (Schmitt, 2000; Clark, 1993). Finally, they hold literary and artistic value, playing a significant role in literature, poetry, and other creative forms of expression (Gibbs & Colston, 2012).

### **The use of body parts in idiomatic expressions**

Using body parts in idiomatic expressions enriches language by employing metaphorical meanings associated with these body parts and adding a vivid and distinctive dimension to communication. Instead of relying on literal language, idioms harness the imagery and symbolism connected to specific body parts to convey messages or ideas in a concise and impactful manner (Steen, 2007).

Body parts are imbued with rich cultural and symbolic associations, making them well-suited for metaphorical usage in idiomatic expressions (Wierzbicka, 1992). For instance, phrases like *head over heels* conjure vivid mental images, even though they metaphorically signify being deeply in love. This metaphorical usage creates a visual representation that enhances our comprehension and emotional resonance with the message conveyed.

Idioms incorporating body parts offer a memorable means to describe various situations, emotions, actions, and relationships. For example, the expression *cold feet* instantly communicates feelings of nervousness or hesitation. The metaphorical imagery of cold or numb feet effectively captures the sensation of being unable to act due to fear or uncertainty.

These metaphorical expressions enable succinct communication, encapsulating complex ideas or emotions in just a few words. By utilizing familiar body parts metaphors, idioms provide a shortcut to convey intended meanings efficiently, without the need for elaborate explanations. Furthermore, idiomatic expressions featuring body parts act as cultural indicators, reflecting the values, beliefs, and experiences of specific language communities. They contribute to linguistic diversity and understanding these idioms offers insights into a culture's history, customs, and mindset (Bazzanella, 1992).

## **Idioms as cultural relics**

Idioms serve as significant markers of cultural heritage, embodying the collective wisdom and experiences of a society. They carry cultural nuances deeply rooted in history, reflecting values, beliefs, and traditions passed down through generations. For instance, idioms related to food can unveil the cultural importance of culinary traditions or specific ingredients. Moreover, idiomatic expressions play a pivotal role in preserving cultural identity, fostering a sense of belonging among individuals to their community. Through understanding and employing idioms, people connect with their cultural roots and maintain a distinct sense of identity (Katan, 2018).

Additionally, idioms offer valuable historical insights, often originating from past events or figures, providing glimpses into bygone eras. According to Steen (2007), these expressions encapsulate shared experiences, conveying universal human emotions and themes that resonate across societies. Furthermore, idioms reflect societal values and beliefs, imparting moral lessons and guiding social interactions. Their usage highlights the significance placed on virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness within a community. As linguistic artifacts, idioms not only enrich language but also serve as invaluable cultural relics, preserving and transmitting the heritage of societies through generations.

### **Cultural context in body parts idioms**

The cultural context is incorporated in body parts idioms through the following aspects:

#### **1. Cultural values and beliefs**

Body parts idioms can reflect deeply ingrained cultural values, beliefs, and customs. Wierzbicka (1992) maintains that they offer insights into how a particular culture views and understands various aspects of life, such as emotions, relationships, and social interactions. Understanding the cultural context allows for a better grasp of the underlying values and beliefs conveyed through these idioms, enabling more accurate and nuanced interpretations.

#### **2. Cultural symbolism**

Idioms involving body parts often incorporate culturally specific symbols and associations. Katan (2028) asserts that these symbols may vary across different cultures, affecting how idiomatic expressions are interpreted and understood. Without awareness of the cultural symbolism attached to these body parts, there is a risk of misinterpretation or misuse of idioms, potentially leading to misunderstandings or cultural mistakes.

### **3. Figurative meaning**

Idioms featuring body parts rely on figurative language and metaphorical thinking. The figurative meanings associated with these body parts can differ between cultures, influenced by cultural experiences, practices, and metaphors. The cultural context helps unravel the metaphorical connections between body parts and abstract concepts, facilitating a deeper understanding of the intended meaning behind idiomatic expressions (Gibbs, 1993).

#### **Choice of the method in the present study**

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the deep socio-cultural and cognitive aspects linked to these idioms. The idioms chosen were grouped by theme, and each one is explained briefly to understand its meaning, along with an analysis of its social and cultural significance, as well as its impact on cognition.

#### **Sources of data**

A comprehensive corpus comprising diverse sources such as literature, media, and everyday conversations was compiled. To gather a broad range of English body parts idioms, reputable dictionaries including Merriam-Webster, Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, Collins Dictionary, and Macmillan Dictionary were consulted. Additionally, credible websites dedicated to idiomatic expressions and language learning platforms were explored to supplement the collection. The amassed idioms were then organized for analysis, with careful documentation of each idiom's source, be it a specific dictionary or website, to ensure proper referencing throughout the research process.

#### **Data analysis**

The examination of body parts idioms entails identifying their historical contexts, cultural origins, and pertinent socio-cultural associations. This analysis involves researching the background of idioms, their patterns of usage, and cultural references, as documented in dictionaries and websites. This analysis also centers on comprehending the underlying cognitive mechanisms and figurative representations conveyed by these idioms, utilizing insights gleaned from the definitions and explanations provided in dictionaries and websites.

#### **Data analysis**

##### **1. Idioms related to the head**

The head's physiological functions include sensory perception, communication, speech production, and digestion. Its diverse organs and structures

enable us to perceive our surroundings, interact with others, and carry out vital bodily processes. Through the intricate interplay between its components and the brain, complex cognitive activities, sensory experiences, and overall bodily functioning are facilitated.

The head holds a profound cultural significance, being associated with personal identity, spirituality, social hierarchies, and artistic expression. Understanding the cultural importance of the head allows for a deeper appreciation of the varied beliefs, customs, and symbolic interpretations linked to this anatomical area. It illuminates how the head acts as a focal point for cultural expression, social engagement, and the formation of individual and collective identities across diverse societies.

*Example: Keep your head up*

This idiom typically advises individuals to maintain open-mindedness, and a willingness to consider new ideas and perspectives. It serves as a prompt for resilience, perseverance, and maintaining a positive attitude in confronting challenges. It mirrors the cultural esteem for mental fortitude and determination evident across various societies. Implicit in its message is the encouragement to uphold confidence and optimism, even amid adversity.

This idiom utilizes the head as a metaphor to represent one's mental and emotional condition. It suggests that holding the head upright signifies an optimistic perspective and the capacity to confront challenges bravely. It underscores the link between body posture, emotions, and cognitive functions.

## **2. Idioms related to the heart**

The heart functions as the central pump of the circulatory system. It is responsible for circulating oxygenated blood throughout the body and supplying essential nutrients to organs and tissues. Through rhythmic contractions and relaxations, it maintains a steady flow of blood, ensuring the continuous delivery of oxygen and vital substances to support bodily functions.

The heart holds cultural significance across various traditions and beliefs, revered particularly in religious and spiritual contexts. It symbolizes divine love, compassion, and the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. Heart-related rituals, ceremonies, and symbols are prevalent in cultural practices globally, underscoring the universal acknowledgment of the heart's importance.

*Example: Break someone's heart*

This idiom refers to causing intense emotional pain or sadness to someone, typically within the context of romantic relationships. The use of this idiom portrays the experience of profound emotional distress resulting from the loss,

betrayal, or rejection of a loved one. It reflects the universality of heartbreak and underscores the significance of romantic relationships and emotional attachments across cultures. Furthermore, it highlights the vulnerability associated with matters of the heart.

The idiom *break someone's heart* employs the cognitive metaphor of the heart as the locus of emotions and affection. It implies that emotional anguish can manifest physically, as if the heart is shattered or harmed. This expression reveals the cognitive link between emotions and physical sensations, emphasizing the profound impact of emotional experiences on individuals.

### **3. Idioms related to eyes**

The eye's physiological role is to facilitate vision, enabling us to perceive and interpret the visual world. It operates in conjunction with the brain and other sensory systems to offer a comprehensive understanding of our surroundings.

The eye bears significant cultural meaning across societies. It often symbolizes perception, knowledge, and insight, representing the ability to discern beyond surface appearances and acquire wisdom. In spiritual and mystical contexts, it is linked to higher consciousness and spiritual insight, as depicted by the concept of the third eye. Moreover, the eye serves as a protective symbol against evil or misfortune, evident in beliefs surrounding the evil eye and the use of eye-shaped talismans.

#### *Example: In the blink of an eye*

This idiom underscores the rapidity of an event or change, suggesting that it occurs almost instantaneously, within an extremely short span of time. It signifies swift or instantaneous occurrences, reflecting a shared human perception of time passing quickly or unexpected shifts in events. It emphasizes the acknowledgment of time as a precious resource and the necessity of seizing opportunities or acting promptly.

This expression underscores cognitive perceptions of time and the capacity to perceive or register events within a brief timeframe. It implies that the rapid movement of our eyes, like blinking, can symbolize time's passage in an instant. This expression reflects cognitive awareness of time's fluid nature and human abilities to perceive and respond to rapid changes.

### **4. Idioms related to ears**

Ears serve a crucial physiological role in capturing sound waves from the environment and converting them into electrical signals for the brain's interpretation. Comprised of three main parts – the outer ear, middle ear, and inner ear – they function by collecting, amplifying, and converting sound vibrations into

electrical impulses. These signals are then transmitted to the brain via the auditory nerve, where they undergo processing and interpretation.

Ears hold significant cultural symbolism associated with communication and language. They represent the capacity to listen attentively, comprehend, and communicate effectively. Across various cultures, attentive listening is esteemed as a demonstration of respect, active involvement, and empathy. The cultural importance of the ear underscores the significance of effective communication in fostering relationships and understanding others.

*Example: Turn a deaf ear*

This phrase denotes the act of ignoring or refusing to listen to something or someone. Its use reflects cultural norms regarding attentiveness, communication, and the willingness to engage with others' perspectives or concerns. It may suggest societal expectations regarding empathy, active listening, and the value of open dialogue.

This idiom involves cognitive processes related to selective attention and information processing. It implies a cognitive decision or filter to disregard certain auditory stimuli, demonstrating the cognitive influence on perception, focus, and interpersonal dynamics.

## **5. Idioms related to the tongue**

The tongue serves crucial roles in taste detection, speech, digestion, swallowing, oral hygiene, and sensing temperature and texture. It detects flavors, aids in articulation, mixes food with saliva, facilitates swallowing, and removes particles. Additionally, it senses hot and cold temperatures and perceives physical qualities. Overall, it is a versatile and indispensable organ for various bodily functions.

The cultural significance of the tongue extends beyond its physiological functions related to taste and speech. It embodies aspects of communication, verbal art, truthfulness, taboos, and symbolic gestures, emphasizing the intricate interplay between language, culture, and social interactions. This significance varies across different societies, offering insights into the values, beliefs, and practices of specific cultures or communities.

*Example: Speak with a silver tongue*

This phrase denotes being skilled at persuasion or eloquence in speech. The use of this idiom refers to individuals who possess persuasive or eloquent speaking abilities. It reflects cultural values associated with the power of communication, influence, and appreciation for effective rhetoric. Furthermore, it may indicate



social expectations regarding charisma and the capacity to articulate thoughts convincingly.

This idiom involves cognitive processes related to communication and social influence. It suggests a cognitive aptitude for crafting persuasive arguments and strategically using language to achieve desired outcomes. It illustrates the cognitive influence on language production, rhetorical skills, and the perception of communicative effectiveness.

### **6. Idioms related to the chest**

The chest plays a vital role in respiration, protection, circulation, and sound production. It houses the lungs for efficient gas exchange, provides safeguarding to essential organs like the heart, aids in blood circulation, and contributes to vocalization. Understanding the physiological functions of the chest allows us to grasp the intricate mechanisms and interconnectedness of body systems that contribute to overall health and well-being.

The cultural significance of the chest encompasses its associations with emotions, interpersonal connections, spirituality, beauty standards, and gender identity. It holds symbolic meaning in expressing and perceiving emotions, conveying nonverbal communication, and fostering connections with oneself and others. Appreciating the cultural significance of the chest provides insight into diverse cultural beliefs, practices, and social constructs that influence perceptions, expressions, and interpretations of this anatomical region.

*Example: Get something off your chest*

*Get something off your chest* means to express or reveal something that has been troubling or bothering you. This idiom highlights the importance of open communication, emotional release, and seeking support or resolution. It may reflect cultural norms that encourage sharing burdens or concerns to enhance psychological well-being.

This idiom relates to cognitive processes associated with emotional catharsis and interpersonal disclosure. It suggests a cognitive acknowledgment of the psychological weight carried by unresolved issues and the cognitive motivation to alleviate distress through verbal expression and sharing.

### **7. Idioms related to the hand**

The hand's physiological functions encompass manipulation, sensory perception, and communication. Its complex structure and sensory abilities enable precise and coordinated movements, tactile perception, spatial awareness, and expressive communication. Understanding the physiological functions of the hand

allows us to recognize its remarkable capabilities, enabling interactions with the environment, participation in activities, and effective communication with others.

The hand holds cultural significance in communication, craftsmanship, rituals, symbolism, and artistic expression. It serves as a vehicle for nonverbal communication, a symbol of skill and mastery, a medium for cultural rituals, and a subject of symbolic and artistic representation. Understanding the cultural significance of the hand provides insight into the diverse ways it carries meaning, reflecting the values, beliefs, and practices of cultures worldwide.

*Example: All hands-on deck*

This idiom is used to indicate a situation where everyone is needed to contribute to a task. It signifies the need for everyone to contribute their effort or involvement in a particular task or situation. This idiom reflects the value placed on collaboration, teamwork, and collective responsibility in many cultures. It suggests that successful outcomes are achieved through the combined efforts of all individuals. *All hands-on deck* employs the cognitive association between hands and physical action. It suggests that the hands represent active participation and engagement.

## **8. Idioms related to feet**

The physiological function of the feet is to offer support, stability, and mobility for the human body. They are intricate structures vital for walking, running, and maintaining balance. Comprising various components, they work harmoniously to facilitate movement, stability, and coordination of the body.

In Western cultures, the cultural significance of feet is relatively subdued compared to certain Eastern cultures, where feet symbolize beauty and social status.

*Example: Get off on the right foot*

This idiom denotes starting something positively or favorably. When individuals aim to get off on the right foot, they endeavor to commence a task, relationship, or venture on a good note, often to ensure smooth and successful progress. This expression reflects cultural norms or rituals associated with auspicious beginnings. Additionally, it may indicate the influence of cultural beliefs in luck or superstitious practices.

*Get off on the right foot* involves cognitive processes related to goal setting and expectation management. It suggests a cognitive intention to embark on a task or relationship with a positive mindset and proactive approach. It illustrates the cognitive impact on planning and strategizing for desired outcomes.

## Discussion

The findings of the current study shed light on the significance of body-part idioms within language comprehension. Firstly, mastery of these idioms goes beyond knowing individual words, encompassing understanding their figurative meanings and appropriate usage. This proficiency is essential for effective communication and cultural assimilation. Secondly, the presence of unique body part expressions across cultures reflects diverse values and experiences, shaped by cultural factors and varying between languages. Thirdly, the utilization of such idioms relates to embodied cognition, wherein physical experiences influence our understanding of abstract concepts. By connecting physical sensations with metaphorical meanings, these expressions bridge the tangible and the abstract. Additionally, they hold social and emotional weight, shaping perceptions and communications while offering insights into societal norms and values. Furthermore, interpreting body part idioms necessitates metaphorical reasoning, moving beyond literal interpretations to grasp intended figurative meanings and mapping them onto literal body parts. Lastly, the extensibility of these idioms underscores language's flexibility, with the same body parts being employed in multiple expressions, each carrying distinct connotations.

### **Conclusion, study limitations, and suggestions for further research**

In summary, this study has delved into the socio-cultural and cognitive aspects of English body parts idioms, offering important understandings of their metaphorical meanings and importance in communication. The results have shown how language, culture, and thinking interact, revealing how idiomatic expressions mirror and influence socio-cultural standards and cognitive functions.

Although the present investigation has provided valuable insights into the field, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, it primarily focused on English body parts idioms within a specific cultural setting, potentially limiting its applicability to other cultures or languages where idiomatic expressions may vary. Furthermore, the interpretation of these idioms can differ among individuals due to personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and language proficiency, introducing subjectivity into the analysis. Additionally, the qualitative research design employed in this study, while offering empirical evidence, may not fully capture the intricate socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions as comprehensively as quantitative approaches, potentially overlooking important insights and contextual details. Moreover, the findings are constrained by the time and context of the research, as societal and cultural changes over time can influence the usage and meanings of idiomatic expressions, limiting their generalizability to future

contexts. Despite efforts to minimize bias, subjectivity remains inherent in the interpretation and analysis of socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions, with different researchers potentially yielding varied findings. Recognizing these limitations underscores the necessity for future research to bridge these gaps and attain a more holistic understanding of the socio-cultural and cognitive aspects of the idioms in focus.

Expanding on the limitations identified in this study, several avenues for further research can provide deeper insights into the socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions of body parts idioms. Firstly, conducting cross-cultural comparative studies can examine how these idioms vary across different cultures and languages, exploring socio-cultural and cognitive differences in their usage, meanings, and interpretations. Such studies would illuminate the influence of cultural factors on language and communication dynamics. Secondly, longitudinal studies are essential to observe how the usage and meanings of body parts idioms evolve over time within specific cultural contexts, considering the impact of socio-cultural changes like technological advancements, globalization, or social movements on the emergence and transformation of these expressions. Thirdly, complementing the quantitative research design used in this study with qualitative methodologies, including interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observations, can provide in-depth insights into socio-cultural contexts, individual experiences, and subjective interpretations associated with body parts idioms. Moreover, exploring specific contextual factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and regional variations can help understand their influence on the usage and meanings of these idioms, interacting with socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions. Additionally, investigating the pedagogical implications of body parts idioms in English as a foreign language education can lead to the development of teaching methodologies and materials that enhance learners' understanding of the socio-cultural and cognitive aspects of these expressions, promoting intercultural competence and effective communication. Pursuing these avenues of further research can deepen our understanding of body parts idioms, expand the scope of knowledge in this field, and effectively address the limitations identified in this study.

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**Սաիդա Թոփի**

Սույն ուսումնասիրության նպատակն է՝ բացահայտել անգլերենի մարմնի մասերի անուններ պարունակող դարձվածքներում առկա խորը մշակութային և ճանաչողական առանձնահատկությունները: Տարբեր աղբյուրներից՝ բառարաններից և կայքերից վերցված օրինակների համակարգված վերլուծության միջոցով մանրակրկիտ ուսումնասիրվում են նշված արտահայտությունների սոցիալ-մշակութային նշանակությունը և ճանաչողական հիմքերը, մասնավորապես՝ ինչպես են դրանք արտացոլում սոցիալ-մշակութային և ճանաչողական գործընթացները: Պարզվում է, որ այս բառակապակցությունները ավելին են, քան պարզապես լեզվական միավորներ. դրանք ծառայում են որպես ընդհանուր փորձի և մշակութային ժառանգության փոխանցման միջոց: Այս ուսումնասիրության արդյունքները ոչ միայն հարստացնում են լեզվի և մշակույթի մեր ըմբռնումը, այլև նպաստում են անգլերենի՝ որպես օտար լեզվի ուսուցման և միջմշակութային հաղորդակցության գործընթացին:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** *մարմնի մասերի անուններ պարունակող դարձվածքներ, մշակութային և ճանաչողական առանձնահատկություններ, փոխարեքական իմաստ, հասարակական արժեքներ:*