

The Inseparability of Culture and Language in Idiomatic Expressions

HAMANE Soraya
Université d'Oran2

Abstract

This article investigates the bond between culture and language concerning the understanding of idiomatic utterances within the context of both Algerian and British cultures. Much has been written on culture and language but not on such an issue. Language is of prime importance to any culture and the influence of culture upon a given language is an intrinsic matter. As far as idiomatic expressions are concerned, what should be kept in mind is that language is deeply embedded in culture. Bearing this in mind, the mode of thinking is what determines the linguistic forms in expressing the concrete objects and the abstract ideas, differences in thought among cultures is of great importance when it comes to idioms. This paper sheds the light on the influence of the two already mentioned components i.e., “culture and language” in figuring out the imagery meanings of the Algerian and British idioms in particular. The inseparability between language and culture is illustrated in this article. This corroborates in a way the perspective that idioms cannot be understood without the intimate ties between culture and language.

Introduction

To examine or discuss the connection between any two factors, it is important to have first a glimpse of each factor in question before one may investigate thoroughly such matters.

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Broadly speaking, culture is a notoriously difficult concept to define since it is perceived from several different perspectives. For some anthropologists, it is considered as a life style; whereas, for some others, it is the by-product of intellectual or artistic endeavours. Edward Burnett Tylor defined culture as the following :

“culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (1870:1; cited by Avruch 1998:6)

Culture refers to the accumulated beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, religion, behaviours, lifestyles, customs, backgrounds and habits that characterize a particular society; in other word, culture is that whole where different components that build up a nation are put together. Hofstede argues in this vein:

“Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”
(Hofstede 1994:5) .

From these quotations, one can deduce the real sense of what culture is. Culture is that unconscious, shared,

integrated, symbolic life style relative to a specific society.

To understand deeply what is meant by culture, one has to perceive it through different approaches; for instance, Culture with a capital “C” that is known as “ high-formal relative”. A culture that is relative to its people i.e. it is a product of certain people of a certain society which reflects them. It includes all their representative achievements such as: art, literature, music, history, geography, economics, sport and so on. The other approach is culture with a small “c” that is known as a lifestyle; all the behaviours and attitudes that help individuals to act and function linguistically and socially in a specific context.

Based on the notions described above, one can understand that each society has its own unique culture. These cultural differences are manifested in terms of language. Linguistically speaking, language is defined as arbitrary system i.e. arbitrary signals such as: voice sounds, gestures and written symbols. Language is not only concerned with communicative function as many people think of, instead, language fulfils many other tasks. It is used as a tool for self-expression as well as to make integration and social adaptation. Thanks to language, people can share their own experiences, beliefs, customs, traditions, views and to communicate these concerns to next generations. As Snell points out:

“language is not seen as ‘isolated phenomena’ which is suspended in a vacuum but as an integral part of culture” (Snell, 1988:39) cited in Homeidi, 2004).

In order to master a language, one has to be a bilingual speaker as well as a bicultural intellectual. Based on the above definitions , the conceptualization of language doesn’t end at the literally meanings of the words since words themselves hold a culture including its history, identity, origins, beliefs and so on. One may wonder what the relationship between the two already mentioned concepts i.e. “Culture and Language”. In fact, the relationship is deeply rooted. Language depicts both the individual’s personality and his cultural history.; thus, this latter shapes personality and culture. In addition to what was asserted, language helps in the growth, development and transmission of culture as it urges the continuity and functioning of societies. Culture and language are intertwined as Winston Churchill once said “ *we shaped our buildings and afterwards our buildings shaped us*”. No culture could be transmitted or known without the manifestation of language. In simple words, language is used to convey and maintain a certain culture. In short, language is a critical element and supporter of culture in the sense that it transfers messages, creates ties, and contributes to its survival and updating.

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As any other language, the Algerian one is deeply rooted due to its varied and rich historical heritage; in other words, it is a mixture of Berber, Arabic, Turkish, French and Spanish. In the same respect, the British culture and language are full of Greek and Latin heritage. This language is plenty of idiomatic expressions since they are stimulated from the bible, Greek and Latin mythologies, literary masterpieces and historic events; for such reasons, idioms can hardly be understood. Once again, this complexity goes back to the cultural richness these two countries possess.

As it is known, languages are arbitrary means, that is to say, there is no direct relationship between the symbol and the symbolized. The symbolic representation of a certain object is based on convention. To exemplify, one has to think about the metaphorical utterances such as idioms and proverbs. This area in particular gives more weight to culture than to the words themselves. The majority of people use these two concepts interchangeably; however, each one is different from the other. On one hand, idioms are phrases used by people in their everyday language which literally speaking have no sense but they implicitly convey a certain meaning. Its main purpose is to transmit a thought more forcefully and deeply than a simple statement would. The recipient of a certain idiomatic expression cannot understand what is conveyed through if s/he doesn't know the culture of the interlocutor. As a way of illustration, if one doesn't know

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that British people adore tea, s/he wouldn't understand that the idiom "you are my cup of tea" means "I really like you". The word idiom originated from the Latin word "idios" which means "personal, private"; however, its definition became a peculiarity in language in the 16th century from the French word "idiome". This latter is seen as a way to express long messages in a short phrase; in addition to that, one has to consider the literal and the figurative sense of a certain expression separately. In this regard, the recipient shouldn't take into account the first but the second i.e. the figurative; for instance, if one "can't keep his head above water", doesn't mean that his head is not touching the water while swimming, instead, it implies that he is not managing a situation well enough. At the same time, there are some idiomatic expressions that have not only an idiomatic or figurative sense but also a perfectly literal interpretation. Chomsky (1980:90) notes that "John kicked the bucket" has two meanings; the first is that "John hit the bucket with his foot" secondly, "John died"; however, there are some examples of idioms that have no literal meaning such as "a scarlet woman" that implies an immoral woman who committed adultery.

On the other hand, proverbs are short sentences or popular expressions that people usually quote to either give advice, wisdom or tell something about life. In addition to this, proverbs are universal statements that can be understood by different cultural background

listeners. For instance, if one takes “hard times will always reveal true friends”, s/he would easily understand that only when experiencing tight moments, someone can recognize his/her real helpful friends.

In the same strand of thought, idioms as a phenomena, exist in both language and culture since they carry a large amount of cultural information such as: religion, history, nationality and psychology. To explain more, they are the heritage of history and product of cultural development. In this respect, knowing idioms is like to kill two birds with one stone i.e. understanding idioms and the cultural background behind them.

From an anthropological perspective, it is rare to go through this matter without hearing the word culture or society. In its simplest sense, culture is known as the set of behaviours and lifestyles that characterize a group of people at a particular time; in other words, it is the underlying structure on which a certain society stands this can include values, standards, norms, rituals, language and all kinds of other things. Unlike culture, which encompasses the tangible and intangible things of a people group, society is one entity that occupies a certain geographical place and shares the same cultural background. In broader terms, society refers to people who share a common culture in particular location; for instance, people living in arctic climates have different cultures from those living in desert cultures. In saying

this, neither culture nor society would have ever existed without the other.

It is crucial to differentiate between the two above concepts i.e. “culture, society” and not confuse culture with society. The first portrays the set of beliefs and practices of a certain group as creates continuity and cohesion, while the second represents the people who share those cultural elements. This blurriness and unclarity between these two elements is due to their co-existence; culture plays a key role in the formation of a certain society, as this latter in turn maintains and evolves the continuity of the culture itself. Therefore, each of them depends on the other.

As it is known, culture shapes people’s world including language; for instance, if a concept is present in one’s culture, it’s also present in his /her language and likewise, when it is absent. For example, Inuit people have a wide range of vocabulary only for the word “snow” such as “Blizzard, Graupel, Flurries” Whereas, in Algeria, it is referred to only as “Snow”. This matter reflects how culture and environment form the way people speak. Idioms are concrete blueprints to what extent culture and language are interdependent. Language is therefore related to and quintessential part of culture. From a dynamic point of view, language is considered as being the carrier of culture which is itself the content of language. Accordingly, one can dig out cultural aspects

from language and explore language phenomena through culture.

As any other society, Algeria has its own identical culture which distinguishes it from any other entity. “It rains cats and dogs” would appear an awkward illogical idiom to the Algerian population since this idiomatic expression doesn’t belong to the Algerian culture; however, the British people would easily understand its figurative meaning. The British people are well known for their excessive petting of cats and dogs. Accordingly, “It rains cats and dogs” implies that it is raining heavily.

In the same line of thought, there is plenty of linguistic evidence of culture difference. As a way of illustration, relationship matter is a vivid example to demonstrate the cultural difference between Algerian people and English ones. In the Algerian language, there are more several precise terms to describe relationships than in English. The Algerians differentiate their relatives on mother’s side from those on father’s side. For instance, “Khal, Khala” to call the brothers and sisters on mother’s side and the words “3am, 3ama” for the father’s side. On the other hand, the British family vocabulary scope is limited. In a narrow sense, this lingual difference illustrates the fact that relationships play a greater role in the Algerian peoples’ life.

As it is already mentioned above, idioms are another sound proofs of cultural differences, if one examines the following British idiom “take someone for a ride” s/he

would think that it means going out with someone; however, the real figurative meaning is to deceive or cheat someone in some way. In this regard, if someone is not acquainted with such kind of idiomatic utterances, s/he will simply understand the literal meaning rather than the figurative one. “Above the salt” is an idiom that dates back to the medieval times when salt was valuable seasoning that was placed in the middle of a dining table and the lord with his family were seated “above the salt”, and other guests or servants below; in this respect, “above the salt” means that someone is of high standing or honor. To understand a certain idiom, one has to know the cultural background of that society. For instance, if someone is not an Algerian person, S/he won’t guess the figurative meaning of the following Algerian idioms: “Manakol zabda manachrub rayab matahla lgaada wa hbibi rayeb”. This idiom means “I neither eat butter nor drink yogurt as the session is not enjoyed when my dear is absent”; accordingly, it reflects the Algerian tendency to have family gathering and sharing great moments by eating butter and drinking yogurt. “Elhadra w lmaghzel” is another utterance that Algerian people use to imply that they have to work and speak at the same time not only stick at talking but also working simultaneously. “Hta yzid, nsemouh Bouzid” i.e. “Till he is born, we name it Bouzid”. This means that one has not to anticipate things before their occurrences.

As it is previously asserted, culture greatly influences the production of idiomatic expressions; “fall from grace”, is a good analogy to consider. This idiom means that someone committed something immoral, wrong, or unacceptable. As a consequence, s/he has lost his/her reputation. This expression reflects the British cultural background. Knowing that, Britain is a country where Christianity and Hebraism are overspread; for this reason, most idioms generated in such background carry rich religious facets. Thus, it is hard to guess the hidden meaning of a certain idiomatic utterance.

“Possession is nine points of the law” is another idiom that proves out how cultural environment impacts idiomatic productions. The already said idiom is meant to suggest that if someone possesses something, s/he will easily claim its ownership than someone who just says it belongs to him/her. This idiom originates from the early English property system where the right to possession of property was endorsed by the king in the form of nine traditional writs. These writs evolved the nine original laws determining the above expression.

To go deeper, the Arab world is dominated by Islamic culture and religion as well; whereas, English speaking world is prevailed by Christian culture and religion. This difference in culture has its effects on the language. As a result, idioms used in Arabic and English will be surely affected according to the principles of both culture and religion in these two languages; for example, “lift horn”

is an idiom from the Bible which means defies God; this idiom is peculiar to English religious culture. Keeping this in mind, one has to analyze the following idiom “when pigs fly”. This statement doesn’t mean pigs will really fly as its literary meaning indicates; however, this latter suggests that something will never happen. This phrase is used presumably because of the unlikelihood that pigs will ever have wings to fly. In this respect, the word choice of certain idiom also mirrors the culture of the spoken language; for instance, Algerian people would never use the word pig in their idioms since it is not part of their culture for religious matters in contrast to the British.

To illustrate more, one has to shed the light on different cultural backgrounds. In addition to the British culture, the Algerian one is of course not an exception. “kolshi fi waktou zine, weli yajel ala khebeztou yakolha ajine”, “everything is beautiful in its right time and the one who rushes his bread, eats it dough”; this means that one has not to rush anything when the time is right, it will surely happen.

From the above explanations, it is clear that the differences which exist in different socio-cultural contexts hugely influence their languages. In this regard, one has also to think about the social factors of the Arabic and English cultures which in turn impact the Arabic and English language. The followings are examples of social idioms that are peculiar to Arab social

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culture and English speakers will not understand the idiomatic meanings if they are translated into English; “dahrah mesnoud”, “maktou3 min shajra”. The former illustrates that Arabs praise big family with many sons and brothers for the reason that they believe that it supports social ranks. Consequently, the Arabs feel proud to be a member of a big family while the latter is used in an opposite situation where all the family members of someone are dead. The person in this regard needs help and sympathy from others around him especially when his family has no longer been source of help, support, and assistance.

The Algerian language is like the English one in the sense that the former is also rich of idiomatic expressions as it uses idioms to reflect, express images including happiness, sorrow, richness and poverty. Other way saying, the idioms generally represent community's wisdom, ‘belief, ‘genuineness, as well as its development. For instance, “Yaati lahm ili maandahsh senine” i.e. “The meat is given to the one who has no teeth” literally speaking, this statement has no sense for British people; however, for Algerians, it has an implicit meaning which is very profound regarding their culture. This latter expresses when people get lucky but they actually don't deserve it. “Break the ice” is an English idiom which its constituent literal words' meaning is totally different from the metaphorical one. Its entire meaning actually is “relieve the tension”. In the same

regard, there is a wide range of examples which depicts the already explanations such as: “to know the ropes” means “to know how a given job should be done”, another one, “To burn one’s boat”, if one takes this statement and interprets it from a literal perspective, he would think that one should burn someone’s boat; however, it has nothing to do with this, instead, it means “To make retreat impossible”. Thus, idioms are not meant to be interpreted literally.

As idioms, proverbs are also fixed, frozen phrases which have particular unchanged meanings. However, what distinguishes a proverb from an idiom is the fact that the former displays shared cultural wisdom. Even though proverbs are seen as culture-specific i.e. for the reason that they are very bound to culture, several proverbs have direct equivalents in different languages. For example, the English statement “out of sight, out of mind” has a similar proverb in Arabic “Elbaid ani elain, baid ani el kalb”. To reinforce more this point, other illustrations are provided: “Forbidden fruit is sweet” “ Kol mamnou3 Marroub” , “A fox is not taken twice in the same snare” “La yaldar el moemine min jahr maratayne”, and the last one is “ Like a bull in a china shop “ Mitl atrash fi elzefa”.

As it has been proved, language can be taken as a verbal expression of culture. This latter is deeply related with language regarding the decoding the implied meaning of a certain idiom in a given social context. Idioms are

linguistic devices which exist in all language as they are seen as non literal expressions. From what was reviewed above, attention is paid to some expectations to cultural differences and their impacts on how people perceive and interpret a certain cultural utterance. Consequently, these cultural diversities are the nucleus of cultural misunderstanding, confusion, unpleasantness, and even the destruction of cross-cultural communication.

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