

Idiomatic Meaning in English Compounds: A Semantic Analysis of Non-Literal Interpretations

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Abstract

Idiomatic compounds in English often present challenges for learners, particularly those for whom English is a second language (ESL). These compounds, such as "brainstorm" and "blackmail," exhibit meanings that deviate from their literal components, leading to confusion in interpretation. This study investigates the processes involved in the semantic shift from literal to idiomatic meanings in English compounds. Using a qualitative approach, idiomatic compounds are analyzed through a semantic lens, identifying the cultural and metaphorical influences that shape their meanings. This study shows that English compound words undergo semantic shifts, with **compositional compounds** (e.g., "honeymoon") retaining some literal meaning, while **non-compositional compounds** (e.g., "blackmail") obscure the original meanings entirely. The findings illustrate how metaphor and culture influence the development of idiomatic expressions in language.

Keywords: Idiomatic compounds; Semantic shift; ESL learners; Metaphorical meaning; Language teaching

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Abstrak

Kata majemuk idiomatik dalam bahasa Inggris sering kali menimbulkan tantangan bagi pembelajar, terutama bagi mereka yang menjadikan bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa kedua (ESL). Kata-kata majemuk ini, seperti "brainstorm" dan "blackmail," menunjukkan makna yang berbeda dari komponen literalnya, yang menyebabkan kebingungan dalam penafsiran. Studi ini meneliti proses perubahan makna dari literal menjadi idiomatik pada kata majemuk dalam bahasa Inggris. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, kata majemuk idiomatik dianalisis dari perspektif semantik, mengidentifikasi pengaruh budaya dan metafora yang membentuk maknanya. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa kata majemuk dalam bahasa Inggris mengalami pergeseran makna, di mana kata majemuk komposisional (misalnya, "honeymoon") masih mempertahankan sebagian makna literalnya, sedangkan kata majemuk non-komposisional (misalnya, "blackmail") sepenuhnya mengaburkan makna aslinya. Temuan ini mengilustrasikan bagaimana metafora dan budaya mempengaruhi perkembangan ekspresi idiomatik dalam bahasa.

Kata kunci: *Kata majemuk idiomatik; Pergeseran semantik; Pembelajar ESL; Makna metaforis; Pengajaran bahasa*

BACKGROUND

Idiomatic meanings in English compounds often undergo significant shifts from the literal meanings of their components, making them challenging for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners to understand. Compounds such as "brainstorm" and "blackmail" demonstrate that the idiomatic meanings cannot be directly inferred from their literal components (Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow, 1994). These idiomatic compounds present difficulties for ESL learners due to the complex semantic shifts involving cultural and metaphorical associations (Lakoff, 1987). In everyday language, these compounds play a crucial role in conveying more abstract and emotionally rich concepts that cannot be fully represented by their literal components alone (Cruse, 2011).

Previous research has shown that idiomatic compounds can be categorized into two types: compositional and non-compositional (Nunberg et al., 1994). Compositional compounds, such as "honeymoon," retain some connection to their literal meanings, making them easier for ESL learners to comprehend. However, non-compositional compounds, like "blackmail," completely obscure the relationship between the literal and idiomatic meanings, making them more difficult for non-native speakers to interpret (Garcia & Lin, 2023). These semantic shifts are driven by cultural usage and collective experiences, which reinforce the idiomatic meanings of these compounds (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008).

This study aims to analyze the processes of semantic shifts in English idiomatic compounds and categorize their semantic characteristics. By examining these idioms through the theoretical framework proposed by Nunberg et al. (1994) and utilizing Lakoff's (1987) conceptual metaphor theory, this research hopes to provide new insights for language educators and linguistic researchers. Additionally, the findings are expected to assist in designing more effective teaching methods for ESL learners, particularly in understanding idioms whose meanings are difficult to predict from their literal components.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze data on idiomatic compounds in English. This approach allows for in-depth and interpretive analysis of the idiomatic meanings that emerge in English.

2.2 Data and Data Sources

The primary data for this research consists of English idiomatic compounds. Data sources are obtained from a variety of reputable resources, including authoritative English dictionaries, relevant academic texts, and digital resources such as language corpora and linguistic databases. These sources are selected for their reliability and relevance, ensuring that the study draws on a comprehensive array of linguistic information to support its findings.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data for this study is collected through an extensive **literature review** from authoritative sources, including **reputable English dictionaries** such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster, as well as **academic textbooks** discussing idiomatic compounds and semantic theories. In addition, **linguistic corpora and language databases** are used to gather real-world examples of idiomatic compounds, ensuring a comprehensive and contextualized dataset. These sources are selected for their reliability, allowing the study to capture both formal and informal usages of idiomatic expressions in English..

2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis of the collected data follows a **two-step process**: identification and categorization.

1. **Identification of Literal and Idiomatic Meanings:** In this initial step, the literal meanings of each idiomatic compound are identified by breaking down the individual components of the compound word (e.g., "brain" and "storm" in "brainstorm"). After

establishing the literal meanings, the idiomatic meaning is determined by analyzing how the compound is used metaphorically or culturally. This stage is crucial for understanding how the original, literal components have transformed into a new, idiomatic meaning.

2. **Categorization Based on Semantic Characteristics:** After identifying both literal and idiomatic meanings, the compounds are categorized into two main groups: **compositional** and **non-compositional**. Compositional compounds retain some transparency between their literal components and their idiomatic meaning (e.g., "honeymoon" where "honey" suggests sweetness and "moon" refers to time). In contrast, non-compositional compounds (e.g., "blackmail") completely obscure the relationship between the literal components and the idiomatic meaning. This categorization helps in analyzing the degree of semantic shift that occurs in idiomatic expressions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

This section presents the analysis of the processes involved in the semantic shift from literal to idiomatic meanings in English compounds, addressing the research questions outlined in the study.

3.1.1 Processes of Semantic Shift in Idiomatic Compounds

The data analysis reveals that the semantic shift in idiomatic compounds follows several stages. First, a combination of words that originally hold literal meanings becomes reinterpreted through metaphorical or cultural associations. For example, "brainstorm" shifts from its literal components (brain + storm) to signify a creative discussion. This shift is largely driven by cultural usage and metaphorical thinking, where ideas are conceptualized as fluid and storm-like phenomena (Lakoff, 1987). In many cases, the semantic shift reflects a cognitive reframing of the literal components into an abstract or figurative context.

3.1.2 Categorization of Idiomatic Compounds

The study categorizes idiomatic compounds into compositional and non-compositional types, as suggested by Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994). Compositional idiomatic compounds retain some degree of transparency in their meaning. For instance, "honeymoon" retains an association with "honey" (a sweet time) and "moon" (a period of time), though the modern idiomatic meaning goes beyond this literal interpretation. Non-compositional compounds, like "blackmail," completely obscure the relationship between the literal meanings of their components and their idiomatic interpretation. Language is a dynamic and evolving medium, reflecting the complex interplay between cultural shifts and linguistic innovation. English, in particular, exhibits a rich tapestry of idiomatic expressions, many of which are derived from compound words. These compounds often undergo semantic shifts from their original, literal meanings to nuanced, idiomatic interpretations, presenting a fascinating area of study for linguists and language enthusiasts alike. To dissect the layers of meaning embedded within English compound words to uncover the processes and patterns that guide their transformation from literal to idiomatic meanings. Guided by the theoretical framework proposed by Nunberg et al. (1994), which distinguishes between "compositional" and "non-compositional" compounds, this study seeks to elucidate the extent to which the components of these compounds contribute to their overall semantic interpretation. Compositional compounds allow for partial inference of their meanings from individual elements, whereas non-compositional compounds obscure their meanings, challenging direct interpretation from their constituent parts.

a. Butterfly

- **Literal Components:** Butter + Fly.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** Refers to the insect known for its colorful wings and metamorphosis.
- **Analysis:** While "butter" and "fly" separately do not imply the insect, the term may have originated from a mistaken interpretation or from the yellow color of

some species. This compound is **non-compositional**, as the meaning is not directly inferable from its parts.

b. Honeymoon

- **Literal Components:** Honey + Moon.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** The period just after marriage when things are at their sweetest.
- **Analysis:** Combining the sweetness associated with honey and the fleeting nature of a moon phase, this term metaphorically describes this blissful period. It is **partially compositional** since the individual components metaphorically relate to the concept.

c. Brainstorm

- **Literal Components:** Brain + Storm.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** An intense creative effort to generate ideas.
- **Analysis:** The term uses the chaotic and intense characteristics of a storm to represent a flurry of activity in the brain. This is **partially compositional** as the metaphorical usage aligns with the combined components.

d. Blackmail

- **Literal Components:** Black + Mail.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** Extortion of benefits or money by threats, especially by threatening to reveal secrets.
- **Analysis:** Historically related to the payment demanded by Scottish border reivers in return for immunity from raids. This compound is **non-compositional**, as the current meaning cannot be deduced just from the words 'black' and 'mail.'

e. Breakdown

- **Literal Components:** Break + Down.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** A failure to function, a mental collapse, or a detailed analysis (break something down).

- **Analysis:** Originally describing the physical breaking down of objects, extended metaphorically to non-physical scenarios. This is **partially compositional**.

f. Moonlight

- **Literal Components:** Moon + Light.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** Working a second job, usually secretly and at night.
- **Analysis:** Originally describing the natural light from the moon, now metaphorically used to describe jobs done under the cover of night. This is **partially compositional** as it uses the literal aspects of moonlight to imply clandestine activity.

g. Deadline

- **Literal Components:** Dead + Line.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** A final, unextendable limit.
- **Analysis:** Historically from a line around a prison which prisoners could not cross without being shot. It is **partially compositional**, using the concept of crossing a line with severe consequences.

h. Heartburn

- **Literal Components:** Heart + Burn.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** A burning sensation in the chest associated with indigestion.
- **Analysis:** Despite involving neither the heart nor a real burn, the term conveys the sensation experienced. This is **non-compositional** because the idiomatic meaning does not logically derive from its components.

i. Sunscreen

- **Literal Components:** Sun + Screen.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** A lotion or spray designed to block out some of the sun's harmful rays.
- **Analysis:** The term straightforwardly describes the function of the product, making it **compositional**.

j. Scapegoat

- **Literal Components:** Scape + Goat.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** A person or group made to bear the blame for others.
- **Analysis:** Deriving from an ancient ritual of transferring sins to a goat, it is **non-compositional** as the modern use metaphorically applies to humans.

k. Cold feet

- **Literal Components:** Cold + Feet.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** Nervousness or hesitation to proceed with an action.
- **Analysis:** Likely from the sensation of cold feet causing discomfort and reluctance to move. It is **non-compositional** as the idiomatic meaning cannot be directly inferred from the words.

l. Goldfish

- **Literal Components:** Gold + Fish.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** A small, golden-colored fish often kept as a pet.
- **Analysis:** This is a **compositional** term as the literal meaning directly aligns with the description of the animal.

m. Headstrong

- **Literal Components:** Head + Strong.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** Stubborn or willfully determined.
- **Analysis:** This compound is **partially compositional**. While it suggests someone with a strong will, the stubborn nuance might not be immediately clear from the components alone.

n. Eyewash

- **Literal Components:** Eye + Wash.
- **Idiomatic Meaning:** Something intended to conceal the true state of affairs.

- **Analysis:** Originally referring to a literal wash for the eyes, now used metaphorically to describe deceit. This is **non-compositional** in its idiomatic sense.
- o. Red tape**
- **Literal Components:** Red + Tape.
 - **Idiomatic Meaning:** Excessive bureaucracy or adherence to rules and formalities.
 - **Analysis:** Stemming from the historical use of red tape to bind legal documents, it is **partially compositional** as it builds on the literal object to convey metaphorical excess

The analysis of the idiomatic meanings of English compound words, based on Nunberg et al.'s (1994) theoretical framework of compositional versus non-compositional compounds, has yielded insightful revelations about the semantic shifts that occur in language evolution. The data reveals a spectrum where some compounds retain a clear link to their literal origins, facilitating a partial interpretation of their meanings, while others transform more dramatically into idioms with meanings that are not directly discernible from their components. This study highlights the adaptive nature of language as it responds to the needs of communication within cultural contexts, employing metaphor and figurative language as tools for evolution and expression. The diversity in semantic transitions from literal to idiomatic across the analyzed compounds underscores the complexity of language and the cognitive flexibility of its users, who continually reshape meanings to enhance communication efficacy and cultural relevance.

3.2 Discussion

The semantic analysis of English compound words and their shift from literal to idiomatic meanings, as examined in this study, aligns with previous linguistic research that highlights the role of metaphor and cultural context in language evolution. The theory put forth by Nunberg et al. (1994) regarding compositional and non-compositional compounds

provides a useful framework for understanding these transformations. Compositional compounds like "sunscreen" and "goldfish," where the idiomatic meanings can be inferred from the literal meanings of the components, support Nunberg's assertion that such compounds retain a degree of transparency in their structure. This transparency allows for easier comprehension and learning, which may explain their prevalence and persistence in language usage, as supported by findings in cognitive linguistics that emphasize the ease of processing and memory retention of compositional phrases.

Conversely, non-compositional compounds such as "cold feet" and "scapegoat" illustrate a deeper level of semantic shift where the idiomatic meaning cannot be deduced directly from the individual elements. This characteristic aligns with cognitive theories that discuss the brain's ability to associate abstract meanings with specific phrases through contextual usage over time. Studies by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on metaphors we live by, suggest that such idiomatic expressions are integral to conceptual thinking and everyday language, providing a cognitive shortcut for complex ideas. The non-compositional nature of these compounds reflects a linguistic evolution where original meanings are obscured, and new, culturally relevant meanings take precedence, offering insight into the adaptive functions of language as highlighted by historical linguistics research.

Further discussion on the role of idiomatic compounds in language points to their utility in enriching communicative acts by providing speakers with expressive precision and emotional depth. This is seen in compounds like "heartburn" or "brainstorm," where the idiomatic usage conveys specific sensations or activities far more vividly than the literal meanings could. Such usage not only enhances communication but also fosters a shared understanding among speakers within a culture, supporting sociolinguistic theories that emphasize the role of language in social identity and group cohesion. This correlation between linguistic form, cognitive function, and social utility underscores the multidimensional nature of language change, as it is driven by cognitive, communicative, and cultural dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the semantic shifts in idiomatic English compounds and analyzed the challenges these expressions pose for ESL learners. Idiomatic compounds, such as "brainstorm" and "blackmail," demonstrate complex meaning shifts that are often opaque to non-native speakers. Through a combination of cultural context and metaphorical thinking, native speakers are able to intuitively grasp these meanings, whereas ESL learners face obstacles in interpreting non-literal expressions. The findings underscore the importance of using metaphor-based teaching strategies to support learners in understanding idiomatic compounds.

The research also highlights the need for greater attention to idiomatic expressions in both language pedagogy and translation studies. Without adequate exposure to idiomatic meanings and their cultural associations, ESL learners may struggle to achieve full proficiency in English. Translators, similarly, face the challenge of preserving idiomatic meanings when translating across languages and cultures.

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