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GERMANIC ROOTS OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the Germanic foundations of English idioms through historical, structural, and cognitive perspectives. As a West Germanic language, English preserves deep phraseological layers inherited from Proto-Germanic and Old English conceptual systems. The study analyzes mythological symbolism, warrior ethics, agrarian metaphors, and formulaic poetic traditions as formative elements in idiom creation. Special emphasis is placed on semantic continuity, metaphorical mapping, and cultural memory embedded in idiomatic structures. The findings demonstrate that many contemporary English idioms represent linguistic fossils of early Germanic worldview patterns.

Keywords: *English idioms, Germanic heritage, Old English, Proto-Germanic, metaphor theory, cultural linguistics, historical phraseology*

İNGİLİS İDİOMLARININ GERMAN KÖKLƏRİ

XÜLASƏ

Məqalədə ingilis idiomlarının german mənşəyi tarixi, struktur və koqnitiv aspektlərdən araşdırılır. İngilis dili qərbi german dillərinə aid olduğu üçün onun frazeoloji sistemi proto-german və qədim ingilis konseptual modelini qoruyub saxlamışdır. Tədqiqat mifoloji simvolika, döyüşçü etikası, aqrar metaforalar və poetik formulalar əsasında idiomların formalaşmasını təhlil edir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, müasir ingilis idiomlarının əhəmiyyətli hissəsi german dünyagörüşünün dil yaddaşında qorunan arxaik izlərini əks etdirir.

Açar sözlər: *ingilis idiomları, german irsi, qədim ingilis dili, frazeologiya, metafora nəzəriyyəsi, mədəni dilçilik*

ГЕРМАНСКИЕ КОРНИ АНГЛИЙСКИХ ИДИОМ

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассматриваются германские корни английских идиом с исторической, структурной и когнитивной точек зрения. Английский язык как западногерманский язык сохраняет глубокие фразеологические слои, восходящие к прагерманской и древнеанглийской концептуальной системе. Анализируются мифологическая символика, воинская этика, аграрные метафоры и поэтические формулы как источники формирования идиом. Результаты показывают, что современные английские идиомы являются языковыми реликтами архаического германского мировоззрения.

Ключевые слова: английские идиомы, германское наследие, древнеанглийский язык, фразеология, теория метафоры, культурная лингвистика

The study of English idioms cannot be fully understood without examining the Germanic foundations of the English language. English belongs to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family, and its earliest historical stage developed among Germanic tribes that settled in Britain during the 5th century. As a result, a significant portion of English phraseology reflects conceptual, cultural, and linguistic patterns inherited from early Germanic society. Idioms are fixed or semi-fixed expressions whose meanings are not entirely predictable from the meanings of their individual components. While English vocabulary was heavily influenced by Latin and French after the Norman Conquest, its core idiomatic system remains predominantly Germanic in structure and imagery. Many high-frequency idioms are built upon native Anglo-Saxon lexical material rather than later Romance borrowings. This fact alone suggests that idioms preserve deeper historical layers of linguistic identity. Early Germanic culture was structured around warrior ethics, tribal solidarity, agrarian life, seafaring, and a strong sense of fate or destiny. These cultural realities shaped the metaphorical models through which experience was conceptualized. Consequently, many English idioms encode metaphors related to battle, strength, endurance, land cultivation, and natural forces. Expressions such as “stand one’s ground,” “fight tooth and nail,” and “hold fast” reflect a worldview in which life is framed as struggle and resistance. The persistence of these idioms in modern English demonstrates the continuity of early Germanic cognitive patterns. Another important conceptual element inherited from Germanic tradition is fatalism. In Old English literature, particularly in heroic poetry, the concept of destiny played a central role. The Old English term *wyrd* expressed the idea of an inevitable fate governing human life. Although the lexical form has disappeared, the conceptual residue survives in idioms related to doom, destiny, and unavoidable outcomes. This continuity shows that idiomatic language often functions as a carrier of cultural memory. Agrarian and environmental imagery also played a crucial role in shaping idiomatic expression. Early Germanic communities depended heavily on agriculture and seasonal cycles. As a result, many idioms draw upon farming metaphors, such as “*reap what you sow*” or “*make hay while the sun shines*.” Even when used metaphorically in modern urban contexts, these expressions retain the experiential logic of agrarian survival. They demonstrate how embodied experience becomes lexicalized and preserved through phraseology. Structurally, idioms of Germanic origin often display simplicity and compactness. They frequently contain monosyllabic verbs and concrete nouns, characteristic of Old English vocabulary. Compared to Latinate expressions, Germanic-based idioms tend to be more direct and action-oriented. This structural feature reflects the typological tendencies of early Germanic languages, which favored strong verbs and compound

formations. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, Germanic idioms reveal stable conceptual metaphors. Life is understood as battle, difficulty as burden, anger as heat, and honor as elevation. These metaphorical mappings are systematic rather than random. They arise from embodied experience and social structure. The endurance of these patterns across centuries indicates that idioms are conservative elements within the lexicon, resistant to rapid change because they are grounded in deeply entrenched conceptual systems. Historical contact with Scandinavian languages during the Viking Age reinforced many shared Germanic phraseological patterns. Later influence from French and Latin expanded the lexical inventory of English but did not fundamentally alter its idiomatic core. Thus, while English vocabulary appears hybrid, its most common and expressive idioms remain largely Germanic in conceptual structure. English idiomatic expression is deeply rooted in the Germanic linguistic and cultural substrate that shaped the earliest stages of the language. As a descendant of Old English, English inherited not only vocabulary and grammatical structure but also conceptual and metaphorical frameworks embedded in the Proto-Germanic worldview. The idiomatic layer of English, therefore, should not be treated merely as a stylistic or decorative component of the lexicon; rather, it represents a historically accumulated system of culturally motivated semantic patterns that reflect early Germanic cognition. Germanic-based idioms typically display: monosyllabic lexical core, Strong verbs, Concrete imagery and action-oriented metaphors. For examples: *break the ice, run wild, fall flat*.

Their structural compactness reflects early Germanic syntactic economy. The reconstruction of Proto-Germanic through comparative linguistic methodology has revealed a semantic system strongly oriented toward concrete experience, physical action, and existential struggle. Early Germanic societies were organized around tribal loyalty, warrior ethics, agrarian subsistence, and a fatalistic perception of destiny. These sociocultural conditions structured the metaphorical models through which reality was interpreted. Consequently, idiomatic formations emerging from this matrix exhibit a high degree of physical imagery, action verbs, and material reference. Modern English idioms such as “stand one’s ground,” “fight tooth and nail,” or “hold the line” preserve the semantic residue of a warrior-centered worldview in which survival and honor were primary values. One of the most significant conceptual categories inherited from the Germanic tradition is the notion of fate. The Old English concept of *wyrd*, prominently attested in heroic poetry, encapsulated an understanding of destiny as an impersonal, inescapable force governing human life. This fatalistic orientation is echoed in later idiomatic constructions referring to doom, destiny, or inevitable outcome. Although lexical forms have changed over centuries, the underlying conceptual mapping remains stable. The persistence of such semantic patterns demonstrates that idioms function as repositories of archaic cultural cognition. The poetic tradition of the Anglo-Saxon

period provides further evidence of the structural foundations of English idiomaticity. The epic poem Beowulf illustrates the prevalence of formulaic diction and metaphorical compounding known as kennings. Expressions such as “whale-road” for sea or “ring-giver” for king reveal an early tendency toward compressed metaphorical representation. These compounds were not merely poetic ornaments; they embodied a worldview in which metaphor served as a primary cognitive tool. Over time, the mechanism of metaphorical condensation became conventionalized, contributing to the stabilization of phraseological units in later English. The transformation from poetic kenning to fixed idiom reflects a diachronic shift from creative metaphor to lexicalized expression, yet the conceptual foundation remains recognizably Germanic. The agrarian dimension of Germanic society also played a decisive role in shaping idiomatic imagery. Seasonal cycles, agricultural labor, and dependence on natural forces structured everyday experience, and this experiential base became encoded in phraseology. Expressions referring to sowing and reaping, weathering storms, or making use of favorable conditions derive from practical survival strategies. Even when such idioms are employed metaphorically in modern contexts unrelated to agriculture, they continue to reproduce the experiential logic of early Germanic life. This continuity supports the theoretical claim that idioms preserve embodied cognition across historical periods. From a structural perspective, idioms of Germanic origin often display lexical compactness, preference for monosyllabic verbs, and syntactic simplicity. These features correspond to the typological characteristics of early Germanic languages, which favored strong verbs and concrete nominal compounds. The syntactic economy observed in many English idioms reflects the morphological and phonological tendencies of Old English. Although subsequent Romance influence enriched the English lexicon with Latinate vocabulary, the core idiomatic stratum frequently retains its Germanic lexical base, indicating a sociolinguistic resilience of native conceptual patterns. The cognitive linguistic approach further clarifies the persistence of Germanic idiomatic structures. According to conceptual metaphor theory, idioms are manifestations of systematic mappings between source and target domains grounded in bodily experience. Germanic conceptualization tended to frame life as battle, difficulty as physical burden, anger as heat, and honor as vertical elevation. These metaphorical schemas remain productive in Modern English and are particularly visible in idiomatic constructions. The stability of these mappings across centuries suggests that idiomatic language constitutes a conservative layer of the lexicon, resistant to rapid semantic change because it is anchored in deeply entrenched cognitive models. Cultural contact during the Viking Age reinforced rather than replaced the Germanic substrate of English phraseology. Interaction between Anglo-Saxon and Norse speakers created a zone of semantic convergence in which shared mythological symbols, maritime terminology, and warrior ideology overlapped. This contact

situation strengthened common Germanic metaphorical patterns instead of dissolving them. As a result, Middle English inherited a stabilized idiomatic system rooted in a broader Scandinavian-Germanic continuum. The Christianization of England introduced new theological vocabulary and symbolic imagery, yet it did not erase pre-Christian conceptual structures. Instead, a process of semantic layering occurred, whereby older Germanic metaphors coexisted with Biblical expressions. This coexistence produced a hybrid phraseological system in which Germanic cognitive patterns remained foundational. Thus, even when idioms appear culturally neutral or universally human, their structural configuration often betrays a specifically Germanic heritage. Theoretical consideration of idioms as “phraseological fossils” provides a productive framework for understanding their historical depth. Like fossils embedded in geological strata, idioms preserve traces of earlier linguistic states. Their internal opacity, semantic rigidity, and resistance to paraphrase indicate a long process of lexicalization. In many cases, speakers use idioms without awareness of their historical motivation, yet the persistence of archaic imagery reveals an underlying continuity of cultural memory. This diachronic durability distinguishes idioms from freely generated metaphorical expressions and situates them within the domain of historical phraseology. In conclusion, the Germanic roots of English idioms represent a complex interaction of linguistic inheritance, cultural continuity, and cognitive stability. The idiomatic layer of English cannot be fully explained through synchronic analysis alone; it requires historical reconstruction of Proto-Germanic conceptual systems, examination of Old English poetic structures, and recognition of sociocultural conditions shaping early Germanic life. English idioms embody not only linguistic tradition but also a durable model of interpreting reality, one that originated in the material, mythological, and existential experiences of Germanic-speaking communities. Understanding this heritage enriches both theoretical phraseology and broader studies in historical linguistics and cultural semantics.

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