

RTS-RELATED IDIOMS AND EXPRESSIONS AS CULTURAL VALUES IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Language is the mirror of national identity, cultural values, and common experiences of people, and one of the most evident examples of such interdependence is idiomatic expressions, especially those related to sports. This article focuses on sports idioms of American English as linguocultural realia that go well beyond the playing field and are actively used in business, politics, and everyday communication. The importance of the research is that it centres on sport-based metaphor as a culturally-based process that reflects not only the use of language, but also thought and socialising patterns in American society.

The paper emphasises the importance of sports idioms as transmitters of cultural memory, social norms and nationally specific value systems (competitiveness, teamwork, initiative and perseverance). It shows how these terms obtain metaphorical values through semantic shifts and enter non-sporting language where they play expressive, evaluative, and pragmatic roles.

The study is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It uses a descriptive and interpretive approach to discuss sports idioms as signs of culture, particularly their origins in specific sports and how they have

changed in contemporary American English. The results suggest that sports idioms not only enrich daily and work communication but are also instrumental in the overall intercultural comprehension, because the appropriate interpretation of these idioms presupposes knowledge of the cultural structures within which they are formed.

Keywords: Idioms, linguoculture, sports metaphors, American English, cultural semantics, intercultural communication.

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Համառոտագիր

Լեզուն արտացոլում է ազգային ինքնությունը, մշակութային արժեքները և ժողովրդի կենսավորձը: Դրանք հատկապես լավ են երևում իդիոմատիկ արտահայտություններում: Յուրաքանչյուր բնագավառ, սպորտը ևս ունի իրեն բնորոշ իդիոմատիկ արտահայտությունները: Այս հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է ամերիկյան անգլերենի սպորտային իդիոմները՝ որպես լեզվամշակութային դրսևորումներ, որոնք, բացի խաղադաշտի սահմաններում կիրառվելուց, ակտիվորեն օգտագործվում են բիզնես և քաղաքական դիսկուրսում, ինչպես նաև առօրյա հաղորդակցման մեջ: Հետազոտության կարևորությունն այն

է, որ ընդգծվում են մշակութային հիմք ունեցող սպորտային իդիոմները, որոնք արտացոլում են ոչ միայն լեզուն, այլև ամերիկյան հասարակության մտածողությունը և սոցիալական փոխգործակցության ձևերը:

Ուսումնասիրությունն ընդգծում է սպորտային արտահայտությունների դերը մշակութային հիշողության, սոցիալական նորմերի և ազգային արժեհամակարգի (օրինակ՝ մրցունակություն, թիմային աշխատանք, նախաձեռնողականություն և համառություն) փոխանցման գործում: Այն ցույց է տալիս, թե ինչպես են այս արտահայտությունները իմաստային փոփոխման արդյունքում ձեռք բերում փոխաբերական իմաստներ և մուտք գործում ոչ սպորտային դիսկուրս, որտեղ կատարում են արտահայտչական, գնահատողական և գործաբանական գործառույթներ:

Հետազոտությունը հիմնված է հասկացութային փոխաբերությունների տեսության վրա (Լակոֆֆ և Ջոնսոն, 1980) և կիրառում է նկարագրական ու մեկնաբանական մոտեցում՝ սպորտային արտահայտությունները՝ որպես մշակութային նշաններ վերլուծելու համար: Այստեղ առանձնակի ուշադրություն է դարձվում դրանց ծագմանը հատուկ մարզաձևերին և դրանց վերափոխմանը ժամանակակից ամերիկյան անգլերենում: Ուսումնասիրությունները ցույց տվեցին, որ սպորտային արտահայտությունները ոչ միայն հարստացնում են առօրյա և մասնագիտական հաղորդակցությունը, այլև կարևոր դեր են խաղում միջմշակութային փոխըմբռնման գործում, քանի որ դրանց ճիշտ մեկնաբանությունը պահանջում է այն մշակութային համատեքստների իմացություն, որոնցից դրանք ծագել են:

Բանալի բառեր՝ իդիոմներ, լեզվամշակույթ, սպորտային փոխաբերություններ, ամերիկյան անգլերեն, մշակութային սեմանտիկա, միջմշակութային հաղորդակցություն:

Introduction

Language is a means of expression of one's identity. It is impossible to understand a foreign language unless you have at least some idea about the conditions the nation speaking the language lives in. In other words, the real use of linguistic elements in speech and the real productivity of speech are motivated by awareness of the socio-cultural life of the people speaking the language. Values, traditions, and customs are very closely connected to the language, as they form an important part of linguocultural realia (Edward, 1990).

Idioms make up a large part of our knowledge of language and, as such, are an integral feature of any language. The very simple definition of an idiom is that “a group of words in a fixed order that has a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own” (dictionary.cambridge.org). We can find idioms in almost every language, and learning them is very important for the mastery of a language.

Idioms are specific to one language because when we try to translate them, they either change their meaning altogether or become meaningless. When learning a language, an individual must learn its words and in what circumstances

they occur, and how to use them. Moreover, people need to learn the idioms of that language because they serve a strong communicative function. To interpret an idiom, it is sometimes necessary to be familiar with the culture in which it originates, which implies that cultural context is of utmost importance.

Representatives of different nations interpret and do things differently, which can make cooperation difficult. Shared cultural backgrounds enable members not only to access the same information but also to use varied methods for coding, storing, and retrieving it, with these methods differing across cultures. Barseghyan (2016) discusses sports idioms and expressions as the reflection of realia in his article, emphasising that various countries perceive and interpret games differently. Furthermore, the meaning the country assigns to the game and sports can be explained within the framework of the linguocultural traditions of the country. Our observations show that the frequent use of sports terms and expressions in non-sporting contexts, particularly in business and everyday speech, is, to a certain extent, motivated by their sociocultural origins and the new connotational meanings acquired in the course of language development. In fact, games and sports idioms and expressions also belong here and constitute an important part of a nation's linguoculture (Barseghyan, 2016).

American English is abundant with idioms which are widely used in everyday speech and conversations. Americans are sports lovers, and it is no secret that in everyday speech, one can easily hear numerous idioms related to sports. Sports idioms, which started with baseball, basketball, sailing, and other sports, have developed to have a meaning beyond their context. Even though they can still be used in sporting contexts, these expressions are becoming increasingly common in general speech, especially in the business world, indicating their wider cultural influence.

Americans in business depend on idioms and cultural references whenever they speak. Such expressions add colour, vitality, and liveliness to their speech and convey subtle meaning in ways not possible through formal language. The more one understands these expressions, the easier it is to participate in either fast-paced meetings or hallway conversations. And knowing how to use idioms will make one a more confident and influential speaker.

Imagine doing business in the U.S. and hearing someone tell you to “keep your eye on the ball” or to “step up to the plate”. “Where is the ball?” you might ask in the first instance, or wonder if you are being taken to dinner in the second. In this section, we will discuss some of the sports-related idioms frequently used in American English.

Theory and Methodology

The proposed study is placed in the context of linguocultural theory, according to which language is viewed as a store of shared cultural knowledge and a means by which social values, behavioural norms, and forms of experience historically formed are preserved and passed down. Idioms are not, therefore,

considered as fixed expressions, but as linguocultural units which encode culturally specific models of world cognition.

The research methodology is based principally on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980). This theory holds that metaphor is a key cognitive tool rather than a stylistic aspect of language. It allows speakers to understand the domains of experience that are abstract in nature using more concrete, embodied, and culturally familiar domains. This involves systematic mappings between source and target domains, in which knowledge from one domain is transferred to another. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In the present study, sports serve as the source domain, while domains such as business, politics, and everyday social interaction serve as target domains. Idiomatic phrases such as **step up to the plate**, **drop the ball**, **carry the ball and throw in the towel** are examples of stable metaphoric correspondence where *competition*, *strategy*, *responsibility*, *success*, and *failure* in sports are applied to the description of similar situations in non-sporting situations. These phrases are manifestations of larger conceptual metaphors, such as life is a game and work is competition, which show how cultural manifestations of sporting activity shape patterns of thought and speech in American English (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The source domain in the current study is sports, whereas spheres of business, politics, and everyday social interaction are relevant as target domains. Idiomatic phrases such as **step up to the plate**, **drop the ball**, **carry the ball**, and **throw in the towel** are examples of stable metaphorical correspondences in which the concepts of *competition*, *strategy*, *responsibility*, *success* and *failure* in sports are applied to conceptualise analogous situations in non-sporting contexts. These phrases are indicative of more general conceptual metaphors, like **life is a game** and **work is competition**, and they show that culturally salient experiences in sports influence thinking and communication patterns in American English (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Simultaneously, the study is informed by the anthropological linguistic tradition related to Franz Boas, who emphasised that language should be interpreted in the context of the cultural environment where it operates. According to Boas, linguistic forms are culturally specific modes of categorising and understanding experience, and language is central to the life, practices and worldview of a speech community (Boas, 1911). In this respect, sports idioms are considered to be verbal reflections of culturally meaningful practices which have acquired symbolic meanings within American society. Their metaphorical expansion into non-sporting spheres indicates the cultural preeminence of sports as an example of action, accomplishment, and socialisation.

Research Methods

The study is grounded on semantic, etymological, and contextual examination of sports idioms in American English. It contains idiomatic phrases based on baseball, football, basketball, golf, boxing and other sports, which have become

common in non-sport contexts in business communication and in conversation. Combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory with a Boasian concept of language as being culturally situated, the work considers sports-related idioms as cognitive-cultural paradigms. These frameworks indicate the way socially prized and popular experiences in sports are converted into linguistic resources to organise abstract thought, shape the way things are interpreted, and determine communicative practices within the American culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Boas, 1911). These expressions are examined from a linguocultural perspective in order to identify the cultural values and behavioural models they reflect.

Results

Baseball Idioms

Baseball is one of the most popular sports in America, and many phrases originated in the ballpark have found their way into common speech.

If something is **in the ballpark**, it means it is within a reasonable range. Likewise, **outside the ballpark** would mean beyond a reasonable range. Suppose you are interviewing for a position and the interviewer asks you how much you want to make. When you name a figure, she might reply that your desired amount was in or out of the ballpark. **A ballpark figure**, on the other hand, refers to a rough numerical estimate, an approximate guess.

The phrase out of left field refers to someone or something very unusual, uncommon or otherwise strange. A person who **plays hardball** is behaving in an extremely determined way to get what they want. For instance, if we are trying to make a deal with someone and they will not give in on their demands, we would say they are playing hardball.

Just like a pitcher would pitch or throw a ball during a baseball game, **to pitch an idea** is to make a proposal or a suggestion about something. This phrase is widely used in business; for instance, at a business meeting, one can pitch an idea about a new project or product.

To step up to the plate literally means for a player to move near home plate to prepare to hit the ball when it is pitched. Idiomatically, it means to accept a challenge, to prepare to do a task or to take up responsibility for doing something. It is not uncommon for a boss to ask her employees to step up to the plate, especially when there are important projects on tight deadlines.

To take a rain check is another very popular idiom which comes from the game of baseball. Back in the days before baseball stadiums had roofs, tickets to baseball games had a counterfoil entitling the spectator to see another game if the one for which the ticket was bought was cancelled because of rain or bad weather. That counterfoil, or receipt, was a rain check. Thus, the term to take a rain check has come to be used in everyday conversations and is used for saying that you are not going to accept an offer or a suggestion immediately, but you may accept it later.

In baseball, a strike is a legal pitch or ball which the batter fails to hit. The

batter or the hitter is out after three strikes. So the term "**three strikes and you are out**" has come to mean that a person gets only three chances to accomplish something.

If you **go to bat for someone**, it means that you give them your help and support. **To be off base** is another idiom originating in baseball, meaning to be incorrect, mistaken, or misinformed. On the other hand, the term **on the ball** is used to describe someone who is attentive, knowledgeable and quick to take action. It originated in the sporting arena and refers to runners' readiness. American sports writers referred to successful baseball pitchers as having **a lot on the ball**, meaning they were talented. In any case, the phrase **on the ball** became an idiom used in everyday conversation. Its companion phrase **get on the ball** means to be careful and get something done (phrases.org.uk).

Football Idioms

American football is one of the most popular sports in the United States, so it is only natural that many idioms have made their way from the stadium into everyday speech.

A game plan is a strategy, originally referring to the strategy to be played on the field during a football game. It is now used to refer to any strategy worked out in advance, especially in politics or business.

The kickoff, in a game of football, is when the ball is kicked to start the game. **To kick off something** or **kick something off** has thus come to mean to begin or undertake something. A presidential candidate, for example, might kick off his or her campaign with a large fund-raising event.

In a football game, the player would seize the ball that someone else had thrown to them and run with it. Hence, to run with something means to accept something, handle it, and develop it further. In American football, players tackle their opponents. From here, tackling a problem has entered the everyday speech to mean attacking a problem with much effort.

In American football, players literally hold the ball and protect it in order to maintain possession while attempting to advance it. So the expression **carry the ball** has acquired the figurative meaning of having a leading role in the competition, assuming responsibility or taking control of an activity.

Push it over the goal line means to complete the activity or project, finish the job. Work often has little value until it is completed. In American football, a team's drive to move the football down the field does not count until the ball crosses the goal line.

The expression drop the ball also comes from football, where a player who fails to catch a ball is charged with an error; thus, the term idiomatically means to fail in one's responsibilities or duties, to miss an opportunity or to make a mistake, especially at a critical point or when the result is very negative.

The idiom **to start the ball rolling** is frequently used to describe the beginning of an activity or series of activities. It is often used at the start of a

meeting, as in “Who would like to start the ball rolling?” meaning who would like to have the first word or bring up the first topic.

Basketball Idioms

Not only is basketball one of the most popular American sports, but it has also influenced everyday speech in the United States. Here are some popular expressions related to basketball commonly used in everyday American English.

Full court press is a strategy in basketball in which the defensive team applies pressure on the offensive team across the entire court. Idiomatically, it means aggressive or increased effort to win or accomplish something, or avigorousattack.

On the rebound is an American English phrase that has its origin in the language of basketball, where it is used to describe a process of picking up the ball after a failed shot. In a more general sense, it means something better or healed when one has gone through a difficult time.

A **jump ball** in basketball is used to refer to the start of the game by passing a basketball in the air between two opponents. Afterwards, each player jumps, hoping to strike the ball in the direction of a teammate. In speech, it refers to the inability to determine anything; for instance, if someone says, “It is a jump ball,” it means they are unable to choose between two things or have difficulty making a decision.

The ball is in your court is another common expression from the world of basketball, meaning it is someone else’s turn to act or make a decision. A shot that goes in just before the buzzer to end the game is a **buzzer beater**, so the expression is often used for anything that gets accomplished just before a deadline.

Golf Idioms

Golf is a game that is played in one form or another throughout the world. Because the game takes time and involves walking, it is often played while discussing business. It follows that business vocabulary would easily adopt golf idioms into its fold.

To make the cut means a golfer must match or better the score required to remain in the final two rounds of a tournament. Accordingly, the idiom means to meet the requirements necessary for an application to be successful or for a candidate to be selected from a group of candidates.

As golf has become more popular in the United States, more phrases from the game have become popular. A phrase that was relatively unheard of 10 years ago but is now used quite often is **to tee something up**. A tee is the short plastic or wooden stick upon which you place the golf ball before striking it. Therefore, **to tee up** has come to mean to make preparations before starting or launching something.

Boxing Idioms

While boxing is not so popular in America as it used to be, the practice of fistfighting is so deeply entrenched in their culture that their everyday lexicon is peppered with a number of idioms and expressions derived from boxing.

Boxing rings are typically enclosed by four ropes running around the four edges of the boxing platform. As a boxer, when your opponent has forced you against the ropes with their attack, you are in trouble, or on the ropes. In everyday use, someone on the ropes is in a state of nearcollapse or defeat, or otherwise is likely to fail.

A boxer is **down for the count** or defeated by his opponent when he is knocked to the canvas and fails to rise within ten seconds. The phrase now refers to being defeated or ruined more generally, as well as to someone who is soundly asleep or unconscious. On the other hand, the term **down but not out** refers to a fighter being knocked down, but being able to get up and continue with the fight. Thus, in everyday speech, this expression refers to someone who refuses to give up and continues to fight in order to achieve their aim.

To give up or to throw in the towel was based on the boxing tradition of the early 20th century, in which a fighter literally tossed a white towel into the ring to concede defeat. Whereas throwing in the towel means giving up, **throwing one's hat in the ring** is an indication that one is prepared to fight (phrases.org.uk). Although modern boxing does not incorporate hats, amateur boxing in the early nineteenth century sometimes did – in the form of accepting a challenge. When the crowd was called upon to provide a challenger for a boxer, someone might literally throw their hat into the ring to take up the call. Today, the phrase **throw one's hat into the ring** still refers to the taking up of a challenge.

Saved by the bell is an idiom that refers to being saved out of a bad situation just in time. Although it is thought to have developed out of the paranoia of the 17th century about being buried alive, it actually alludes to boxing, in which a losing boxer is rescued by a bell sounding the conclusion of a round. The correlation with the burial was brought about by the perception that a wrongly uttered dead man would come back to life and ring a bell connected to their coffin, thus showing the actual terror of being buried alive of that era (phrases.org.uk).

Any blow under the beltline is usually regarded as illegal in boxing. A **blow below the belt** is what is commonly referred to as a *low blow*. Both terms now have a wider meaning of any insulting, unfair or unsporting behaviour.

The expression **to roll with the punches** has an obvious connection with boxing; when a boxer **rolls with the punches**, they move their body away from the blows of their opponent, thus reducing the force of the impact. The figurative sense of the phrase means to adapt easily to unfavourable circumstances.

The corners in a boxing match are the two opposite angles of a boxing ring, on which the boxers take their breaks. A boxer typically has a *cornerman* (usually

their coach or trainer) who instructs them between rounds. This practice gave rise to the phrase **in one's corner**. Figuratively, having someone in your corner means having their support and help (Client Challenge, n.d.).

When you **lead with your chin** in boxing, you stick your neck out or leave yourself unprotected. Figuratively, this refers to speaking or behaving incautiously and carelessly. **To beat someone to the punch** means to do something before they do, to outperform someone, and is based on the notion of striking a blow before your opponent can (Tung, 2015). This boxing sense dates back to 1913, while the figurative meaning emerged just a couple of years later.

General Sports Idioms

Here are some common sports idioms used in today's casual conversations, with their definitions (Ammer, 2013).

Table 1.

Common Sport Idioms According to the Type of Sport and Their Meanings in Casual Conversation

at this stage in the game	any sport	at this time
across the board	cards	equal for everyone, applying to all
under the wire	horse racing	at the very last moment, at the last possible opportunity, just in time
bark up the wrong tree	hunting	You have got the wrong person or idea
blow the competition away	any sport	to defeat someone or something completely, especially in a sports competition
call the shots	billiards	make the decisions
chip in	gambling	help by donating money or time
down to the wire	horse racing	used to denote a situation whose outcome is not decided until the very last minute
front runner	track	one of the people who is expected to win
get a head start	horse racing	start before all others
get into the full swing	tennis	be comfortable doing something after some time
get off the hook	fishing	escape, have responsibility removed
give something or someone a fair shake	gambling	try for a while before giving up
get a second wind	sailing	have a burst of energy after tiring
give it your best shot	hunting	try your hardest
give one a run for one's money	horseracing	try one's hardest to defeat another person
go overboard	sailing	do or say more than you need to
have the upper hand	cards	have a better chance of winning or succeeding
hit below the belt	martial arts	do or say something that is very unfair or cruel
hit a snag	boating	come up against a problem
hold all the aces	cards	expected to win or succeed
thelhome stretch	horse racing	almost the end
hot shot (big shot)	hunting	an important or very successful person
jump the gun	track	start too early

keep one's head above water	swimming	try not to fall behind in work or other duties
learn the ropes	sailing	understand new things
let her rip	boating	go ahead now
level playing field	any field sport	everyone has an equal chance
long shot	hunting	a very difficult thing to accomplish
make the cut	any sport	be chosen to be part of a team or group
neck and neck	horse racing	to be in a close tie with someone
no sweat	any sport	no problem
not playing with a full deck (of cards)	cards	not having full brain capacity
out of someone's league	team sport	not as good as someone
on target	darts	doing the right thing to succeed
plenty of other fish in the sea	fishing	there are many other men and women to date
race against time	track	there is almost no time left to accomplish something
settle a score with someone	any sport	get even with a person after a previous battle
shot in the dark	hunting	a guess
skate on thin ice	skating	do something risky, take a chance
take sides	any sport	choose a person or group to support
take the bull by the horns	bull fighting	accept the challenge and try your hardest
take the wind out of one's sails	sailing	make someone feel deflated
time out	any sport	break
under the table	gambling	illegally
win hands down	gambling	easy victory

Recent advances in the investigation of sports idioms demonstrate their ongoing change under the influence of digitalisation and globalisation. In modern communication, sports-related terms are not limited to traditional fields like business or politics; they also appear in digital media, technology, and global communication. They have become common on social media and in online journalism, and as real-time commentary, making their frequency, flexibility, and evaluative power greater. Meanwhile, numerous sports idioms have undergone semantic expansion and abstraction, with terms like game changer, level playing field, and move the goalposts gaining widespread application even out of context. Moreover, contemporary discourse tends to integrate sports metaphors with other areas of conceptual metaphor, including those of gaming or warfare, thus producing hybrid metaphorical systems that enhance persuasive and expressive capabilities. In that way, sports idioms in modern English may be regarded as dynamic linguistic-cultural units capable of reflecting both the preservation of old values and the adaptation to the communicative requirements of the digital era.

Conclusions

Idioms take the heavy responsibility of spreading culture and national traits. Each idiom presented in this work contains a small part of the customs of the local people. It can be stated that idioms are largely shaped by the people to whom they belong. In order to understand them properly, people should have reliable knowledge about the history and culture as well.

The examples presented above reveal a fundamental tone characteristic of the voice of people's feelings and thoughts, help capture the soul of a nation, and testify to the capacity of sport to provide metaphorical interpretations of objective reality across different spheres of activity. Our observations lead us to conclude that idiomatic expressions originating in sports will continue to feature prominently in American English for international communication.

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