CULTURE AND ETHNICITY IN IDIOMS AND PROVERBS

ZOLTÁN Ildikó

Rezumat

Lucrarea tratează un număr de expresii idiomatice, proverbe şi alte structuri asemănătoare legate de diverse aspecte ale relaţiilor interpersonale, dragoste şi mariaj, presentând caracteristicile lor generale din punct de vedere lexical şi semantic, probabila sau posibila origine a câtorva mai puţin evidente, completat cu cîteva referiri la structuri similare în limba română.

While you're trying to get over the bitter-sweet ups and downs of calf love or puppy love, however early in life, you usually find out for yourself that the forbidden fruit is most tempting or that two's company, three's a crowd. When you are in love, affection is said to blind reason. In other words, love is blind and although beauty is only skin deep, it is in the eye of the beholder, since man makes beautiful what he loves. That's why if Jack's in love, he's no judge of Jill's beauty.

As a matter of fact, the course of true love never did run smooth. We may accept that love makes the world go round (in neck to neck competition with money), conquers all and makes all hearts gentle, but a faint heart never won a fair lady. On the other hand, if she has her cap set for him and knows that the way to a man's heart is through his belly, she will probably go to any lengths to have him, since all's fair in love and war. But be careful with one-night stands: short love brings a long sigh. And although time heals all wounds, it's better to encounter someone only like ships that pass in the night, as things get more complicated when the woman loved not wisely but too well and has a bun in the oven but no-one to make an honest woman of her. However, the man who is bold enough to love and leave should not forget that the greatest hate springs from the greatest love and hell has no fury like a woman scorned.

Being separated from your loved one is no bed of roses either. The problem within the problem is that there are contradictory opinions about this situation. Some say that distance lends enchantment to the view and absence makes the heart grow fonder, but pessimists – or realists? – know better and warn you against staying far from eye, far from heart for too long because that implies out of sight, out of mind and as a consequence seldom seen, soon forgotten.

Another possible danger is that you may not see cupboard love for what it is and either because of the aforementioned blindness or because your partner leads you by the nose, you finally buy a pig in a poke. You will only discover this when your spouse shows his or her true colours, and then it's usually too late. But don't worry, you will certainly have comforters to rub it in: marry in haste, repent at leisure.

But let's say you have successfully avoided the pitfalls and you think you have found the one and only, someone you would pledge yourself to have and to hold through thick and thin, for better or for worse and so on. Most people – especially men – cross the Rubicon

BDD-A2949 © 2002 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:54:10 UTC)

after they sow their wild oats in the prime of their life. When a couple decide to tie the knot, they usually believe that marriages are made in heaven. However, they must be lived on earth, which is not roses all the way. First of all you are faced with the request or even demand: love me, love my dog, which seldom refers exclusively to pets. This is hardly love's labour when your husband is still tied to his mother's apron strings. In this case, there will be no love lost between the two women, to say the least, they might be at loggerheads all the time.

It usually doesn't take long to establish the pecking order in a marriage and it will soon be clear who rules the roost/ roast. Conservatives would expect the husband to be the dominant male, in modern marriages the two parties are supposed to be equal, but sometimes there is a henpecked husband, as she wears the breeches and sometimes treats him like dirt. This may also depend on who brings home the bacon: if couples are fighting like cat and dog it usually happens when for one reason or other it's difficult to make both ends meet.

Sometimes your better half turns into your bitter half when you meet an old flame and your good man or lady is seized by the green-eyed monster: you might easily find yourself in the doghouse and as miserable as sin.

However, where there's a will, there's a way, and if they can stick it out together they will have a marriage as steady as a rock and live happily ever after – till death does them part.

We often read or hear the phrase 'language is a living thing', but seldom stop to think what it really means. Living things grow, change and die, and so does language.

Recently, educated usage has become more flexible and tolerant about what is considered to be correct or acceptable not only in several parts of grammar, but also in style.

Socio-linguistic studies have shown that the general tendencies of present-day English are towards more idiomatic usage. Therefore it is important to remember that idioms are not only colloquial expressions associated with conversation and informal language, a separate part of the language, which one can choose either to use or to omit, they form an essential part of the vocabulary of English. They appear in formal style as well as in slang, in poetry, in journalism and magazines, where writers are seeking to make their articles and stories more vivid, interesting, and appealing to their readers. Idioms help speakers and writers to be fluent and to get their opinions across effectively, as they have an important role in conveying evaluation and in developing or maintaining interaction

An idiom is a special kind of phrase. It can be defined as a group of words that - when used together - have a meaning different from the individual meaning of each word. If you do not know that the words have a special meaning together, you may well misinterpret what someone is saying, or be puzzled by why they are saying something that is untrue or irrelevant. (Moon 1995: v)

Idioms are, in a very broad sense, metaphorical rather than literal: they are effectively metaphors that have become 'fixed' or 'fossilized'. In some cases, it is fairly easy to see how the idiomatic meaning relates to the literal meaning, as the image in the metaphor supports it or one knows how the metaphorical meaning has developed. In other cases, the literal meaning may make no sense at all. In a few further cases, the metaphors in the idioms are peculiar, and their true origins are unknown or uncertain, so it is very difficult to see how or why the idioms have come to have their current meanings.

Idioms are also more or less invariable or fixed in form or order in a way that makes them different from literal expressions. Almost all idiomatic phrases fail in one way or another to permit the usual grammatical operations which literal phrases will permit.

Metaphorical meaning and a certain kind of invariability are related to each other. Although these are the two major characteristics of idioms, they are very broad and general. Idioms vary a great deal in *how* metaphorical or invariable they are. In other words, *idiomaticity* (the quality of being idiomatic) is a matter of degree or scale. Thus, some of these phrases

BDD-A2949 © 2002 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:54:10 UTC)

may be used in a literal context or they may be used idiomatically. Other phrases have no literal meaning at all and may only be used as idioms. Some idioms are completely fixed, others have a limited number of variants (two or more alternative forms), or a variant expressing the opposite meaning. Others are very open and allow a large number of words to be used in certain positions.

If we make an attempt to list some of the idioms related to the broad subject of love and marriage, there certainly are more ways to group them. One of these could be according to semantic and structural characteristics (after Longman 1979) :

1. Traditional idioms – the types of expressions, which people usually understand by the term idiom. Many of them are almost full sentences (*to sow one's wild oats* – to do some foolish things, waste one's time in worthless pleasure-seeking, particularly sexual activity before marriage). Others function like particular parts of speech (*cupboard love* – insincere affection shown with the selfish or greedy intention of gaining something for oneself).

2. Sayings or proverbs – usually complete sentences, certain part of which have also become idiomatic expressions or clichés (*Beauty is only skin deep.* – some desirable or admirable things are nonetheless superficial or transient).

3. Idioms in which actions stand for emotions or feelings – idioms that refer to actions which have a specific meaning or significance (*she has her cap set for him* – she is trying to turn a male acquaintance into a suitor). It is important to note that these actions are not literal and that the meaning associated with a particular action in one language may not be the meaning associated with that particular action in some other language or culture. In these idioms the meaning is often specific to English-speaking countries. Thus one should be especially careful in learning these idioms, being also aware of the danger of translating such phrases word for word.

4. Similes – idioms which compare a quality, condition, action, etc., with a noun (*as steady as a rock* – reliable, firm and standing safely on the ground). These phrases emphasize the meaning of the first word and can usually be translated by simply putting 'very' in front of it. Certain verbal idioms are also similes and function in a similar way to the adjective phrases (*fight like cat and dog* – disagree or argue violently, often repeatedly).

5. Pairs of words – idioms consisting of pairs of words joined by *and* or *or*, which usually cannot be reversed (*through thick and thin* – persistence in a task or in support of someone through easy and difficult periods alike).

6. Phrasal verbs – expressions that consist only of a verb and one or more adverbial particles or prepositions (*stick it out* – bear or suffer an unpleasant situation to the end).

If we consider their sources, it is hardly surprising that so many of them are from the Bible, or from the standard marriage vow (the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England and the Episcopal Church). Most of these have also taken root in similar form in most other languages into which the Book was translated: *the forbidden fruit; to have and to hold, for better for worse* and the idiom with similar meaning *through thick and thin.* Here the two adjectives seem to have referred originally to the conditions encountered by a rider on a horse, who passes alternately through areas where the thickets of wood are dense or where the growth is sparse.

Another rich source are the literary works, first of all Shakespeare's. Both *the green eyed monster* and *(one that) loved not wisely but too well* come from Othello.

Hell has no fury… :The Mourning Bride, by William Congreve;

distance lends enchantment to the view : Pleasures of Hope, by Thomas Campbell;

… *roses all the way* : The Patriot, by Robert Browning;

… *bed of roses* : The Passionate Shepherd to His Love, by Christopher Marlowe;

ships that pass in the night : Tales of a Wayside Inn, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow;

BDD-A2949 © 2002 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:54:10 UTC)

in the doghouse : the figurative meaning has probably arisen from an episode in Peter Pan, by James M. Barrie;
to cross the Rubicon (to commit oneself irrevocably) and the closely related *the die is cast* are attributed to Caesar who literally crossed the river Rubicon in 49 B.C., thereby provoking a civil war with Pompey.

Old sayings and proverbs live on in *love me, love my dog; marriage made in heaven* or *two's company, three's none / a crowd.*

The practice and the experiences of everyday life must have been pretty much the same everywhere and the source of many idioms and phrases. This is probably why the expression *to lead somebody by the nose* (to persuade sy to do what one wants; control sy completely; mislead sy easily) exists in the same form in most of the other Indo-European languages: in Latin, Italian, French, Romanian (*a duce/purta de nas pe cineva*), Hungarian, German, Russian, Bulgarian, etc. It was based on the practice of fitting a ring in the noses of unruly or 'disobedient' animals (especially bears or bulls) and lead them by it. The slightest tug or twitch caused sharp pain to the animal and thus it was forced to obey and follow its master, no matter how strong or fiery it was.

If we take a closer look at *to buy a pig in a poke* (to buy or accept something without having examined it or being sure what it is), we discover a surprising closeness to the Romanian *a cumpăra mâța în sac* (to buy the cat in the sack). The poke was a small bag or sack, and the pig was a suckling pig. The game was to put a cat in the poke, or maybe even more in separate pokes. A con-man would then approach possible buyers with a single piglet, saying that it was a sample of those tied up in bags (pokes) awaiting sale. He would try to persuade the buyer not to open the poke lest the pig should get away. If the buyer insisted on seeing what he was getting, and the seller had to open the poke, he would literally *let the cat out of the bag.*

In most cases, however, the same thing or idea is expressed in quite a different way in languages, especially in those, which don't have a common origin, a shared cultural background or at least territorial contact. This is the case with *to show one's true colours* (to show one's true character; used to describe a person who has stopped acting falsely or pretending to be that he/she is not). The expression is related to the 'preliminary' *to sail under false colours* (to pretend to have a certain character or beliefs, principles, etc., which, in reality, one doesn't have). In these expressions (and also in others: *with flying colours, to join the colours, to lower one's colours,* etc.), 'colours' refers to the particular flag of a ship or regiment. The first two are obviously connected to sailing and trade by sea, and are probably as old as the 'profession' of piracy itself. It was a trick used by these villains to approach 'under false colours' an unsuspecting trading ship they had spotted, and to raise their real flag only when they were close enough to attack and the trader could no longer escape being robbed and possibly even destroyed.

There are no references to such perils at sea in either the Romanian or the Hungarian equivalent. One variant in Romanian is *a-şi arăta adevărata faţă* (to show/reveal one's real face) which compares the falsely assumed or pretended character/attitude to a mask which, when thrown off, no longer hides the probably less engaging real features.

Another would be *a-şi da arama pe faţă* (to reveal its/ one's copper). The core of counterfeit coins was usually of copper, covered/ varnished with a thin layer of gold or silver. As this 'coating' was gradually wearing off in time, the underlying (hidden) copper began to show through and the coin could no longer pass as a piece of precious metal.

There is also a Romanian expression, *a-şi arăta colţii* (to show one's fangs) which refers to a certain 'phenomena of nature'. Besides the figurative meaning of these expressions, the concrete original picture is also still obvious: it refers to those animals (especially dogs or

BDD-A2949 © 2002 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:54:10 UTC)

wolves) preparing to bite or attack, which raise their upper lip threateningly to express their anger or readiness to fight.

The expression *(a) henpecked husband* (a husband dominated and constantly nagged at by his wife) is related to the *pecking order* (graded order of hierarchy or seniority amongst the people of a group). The latter must have originally referred to the natural order that exists in a flock of birds, e.g. domestic fowl. On the one hand the stronger ones feed before allowing the weaker ones to do so, on the other hand every bird pecks those lower in the scale without fear of retaliation. Thus, the natural thing would be for the cock to peck the hen. Obviously, a male bird (the 'husband') pecked by any of 'his' hens or 'wives' would be a sorry sight – a sign of deplorable weakness.

The idiom which expresses the idea of a *henpecked husband* differs from the English one in Romanian: *a-şi ţine bărbatul sub papuc* (to keep/ hold one's husband under the slipper). The 'movement' in this idioms takes us back to times when the winner of a single combat placed his foot on the neck or head of his opponent to express that he has humiliated him totally. Since the slipper was a footwear characteritic for women (in some regions even part of the traditional folk costume), the foot wearing it would obviously be that of a woman. Thus, the idioms are irreversible in both languages: it would be very strange to speak about a 'henpecked wife' or about *him* keeping *her* under the slipper .

Idioms are one of the most difficult parts of the vocabulary because they have unpredictable meanings or collocations and grammar. As these special connotations and pragmatic meanings are not obvious to people who are unfamiliar with that idiom, the real meaning of the statement is usually missed. Similarly, someone may use an idiom without realising it will be interpreted as critical or disapproving, and therefore unintentionally cause the wrong reaction in the person they are talking to.

One of the main difficulties for learners is deciding in which situation it is correct to use an idiom, i.e. the level of style (neutral, informal, slang, taboo, etc. idioms). Learners of a foreign language may also have difficulty deciding whether an idiom is natural or appropriate in a certain situation. Another difficulty is that of fixed idioms and idioms with variants. It is most important to be exact in one's use of fixed idioms, as an inaccurate idiom may mean nothing to a native speaker. Above all, it is extremely unwise to translate idioms into or from one's native language. One may be lucky that the two languages have the same form and vocabulary, but in most cases the result will be utterly bewildering to the English native speaker – and possibly highly amusing. (Seidl 1988)

Nevertheless, idioms are, at the same time, one of the most interesting parts of the vocabulary of a language. They are interesting because they are colourful and lively, and because they are linguistic curiosities. They tell us not only about the mythology, history, tradition, beliefs and customs; but more important, about the way of thinking and the outlook upon life of the people who speak the language that has produced them.

References:

1. Courtney, Rosemary 1994, *Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs*. Essex England: Longman Group UK Limited
2. Manser, Martin 1990, *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*. London: Sphere Books Ltd.
3. McArthur, Tom (Ed.) 1996, *The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
4. Rogers, James 1994, *The Dictionary of Clichés*. New Jersey: Wings Books

BDD-A2949 © 2002 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:54:10 UTC)

5. Seidl, Jennifer 1988, *English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
6. Tăbăcaru, Octavian 1999, *Dicţionar de expresii idiomatice al limbii engleze*. Bucureşti, Editura Niculescu SRL
7. Warren, Helen 1994, *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of English Idioms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
8. *The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms* 1995, London: Harper Collins Publishers
9. *The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* 1979, Longman Group UK Limited

BDD-A2949 © 2002 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:54:10 UTC)