

A comparative study of phraseological units in African and English languages

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Abstract

This research presents a comparative study of phraseological units in selected African languages and English, focusing on their semantic, structural, and cultural peculiarities. Phraseological units, consisting of idioms, proverbs, collocations, and fixed expressions, constitute an essential component of linguistic competence and cultural identity. They embody collective experience, worldviews, and social values, making them significant for both linguistic analysis and intercultural communication. The research aims to analyse the similarities and differences in the formation, usage, and interpretation of

phraseological units across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Drawing on theories from cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, and phraseology, this study employs qualitative and comparative methods to analyse data collected from literary texts, dictionaries, and spoken discourse in English and selected African languages. The findings demonstrate that, while many phraseological units in both language groups share universal conceptual metaphors related to nature, the body, and social relations, they differ considerably in imagery, symbolism, and pragmatic functions. African languages tend to reflect communal values, traditional beliefs, and environmental influences, whereas English phraseology often emphasises individualism, industrial experience, and historical influences. By identifying common patterns and culturally specific features, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of linguistic relativity and cross-cultural semantics. The results are expected to benefit linguists, translators, language educators, and intercultural communication specialists by providing insights into the cultural embeddedness of phraseology and its role in facilitating human interaction.

Keywords: Phraseological units, idioms, African languages, English, comparative linguistics, cultural semantics, intercultural communication

Introduction

Language is not only a system of grammatical rules and lexical items but is also considered to be a repository of cultural knowledge, collective memory, and social experience. One of the most vivid manifestations of this cultural dimension is found in phraseological units, which include idioms, fixed expressions, proverbs, and set phrases. These linguistic constructions function as stable combinations whose meanings cannot always be inferred from their

individual components (Burger, 2015). As such, phraseological units play a crucial role in shaping communication, expressing emotions, and transmitting cultural values in the linguistic process. From a structuralist perspective, language is viewed as an interconnected system where meaning emerges from the relationships among its elements. This idea was first systematically articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, who emphasised the social nature of language and its symbolic function (Saussure, 1916/1983). Within this framework,

phraseological units can be understood as semiotic signs that reflect both linguistic conventions and cultural norms. Their stability and figurative nature make them especially significant for linguistic and anthropological research. In the context of globalisation and increasing intercultural interaction, understanding culturally embedded linguistic phenomena has become more significant than ever. English, as a global lingua franca, constantly interacts with indigenous and regional languages, including those spoken across the African continent. African languages, characterised by rich oral traditions and strong links to communal life, possess highly developed systems of idiomatic and proverbial expression (Adeyemi, 2020). A comparative analysis of African and English phraseology therefore suggests valuable insights into how different societies conceptualise reality through language.

The term "phraseological unit" refers to a combination of words that is fixed or semi-fixed in form and whose meaning is partially or wholly idiomatic (Moon, 1998). Scholars generally classify phraseological units into several categories, including idioms (e.g., *spill*

the beans), collocations (e.g., *make a decision*), proverbs (e.g., *A stitch in time saves nine*), and routine formulas (e.g., *How do you do?*). In African languages, phraseological units are often deeply rooted in oral culture and traditional knowledge systems. Proverbs and idiomatic expressions frequently draw on images from agriculture, animal behavior, weather patterns, and kinship relations among others (Yankah, 2012). For example, in many West African languages, animal metaphors are used to express moral values and social criticism. Such expressions function not only as linguistic tools but also as mechanisms for social regulation and education. The study of phraseology intersects with several theoretical traditions in linguistics. Structuralism, functionalism, cognitive linguistics, and sociolinguistics have all contributed to the understanding fixed expressions and their meanings. Cognitive linguistics further identifies idiomatic meaning through conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to this theory, abstract concepts are understood in terms of concrete experiences. For example, emotions may be conceptualised through bodily

sensations (*cold-hearted, warm welcome*), while social relations may be expressed through spatial metaphors. Both English and African languages rely on such metaphors, although the source domains may differ due to environmental and cultural factors.

English phraseology has been extensively studied due to the language's global status and rich literary tradition. English idioms often originate from historical events, religious texts, maritime culture, and industrial life (Spears, 2005). For example, expressions such as *between the devil and the deep blue sea* reflect maritime experience, while *the writing on the wall* has biblical origins. Moreover, English phraseology reflects the values such as individualism, competition, and pragmatism. Idioms like *time is money* and *stand on your own two feet* illustrate cultural attitudes toward work and independence (Hofstede, 2011). Such expressions reveal how language encodes social ideology.

African languages represent a vast and diverse linguistic landscape, encompassing Niger-Congo, Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan families. Despite this diversity, many African

languages share common cultural features, including strong oral traditions, communal values, and close connections to nature.

Proverbs and idioms occupy a central place in African discourse. They are used in storytelling, conflict resolution, political speeches, and everyday conversation (Finnegan, 2012). In many different societies, mastery of proverbial language is considered a sign of wisdom and social maturity. African phraseological units often rely on imagery drawn from local ecology and social life. For instance, agricultural metaphors are common in farming communities, while pastoral societies employ livestock-related imagery. Expressions related to kinship and respect for elders also feature prominently. These units function as carriers of moral norms and collective identity (Adegbija, 2004).

Unlike English, many African languages lack extensive written corpora, which poses challenges for systematic phraseological research. Nevertheless, recent efforts in documentation and digitisation have begun to address this gap.

Comparative linguistics seeks to identify similarities and differences between languages in order to reveal universal and culture-specific patterns. In phraseological studies, comparison focuses on semantic equivalence, metaphorical motivation, and pragmatic function. Previous studies have pointed out that some conceptual metaphors are universal, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY or TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These metaphors appear to be in both English and African languages, suggesting shared cognitive foundations. However, their linguistic realisations vary according to cultural differences. For example, while English may express perseverance through *keep your head above water*, an African language may use an image related to farming or animal husbandry. Such differences highlight the role of environment and cultural practice in shaping figurative language (Kövecses, 2010).

This comparative research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to theoretical linguistics by integrating structural, cognitive, and cultural approaches to phraseology. Second, it enhances understanding of African

languages, which remains underrepresented in global linguistic research. Third, it provides practical insights for translators, educators, and intercultural communicators. In language education, awareness of phraseological units improves learners' fluency and pragmatic competence (Wray, 2002). For African learners of English and English learners of African languages, comparative knowledge can reduce negative transfer and enhance communicative effectiveness. This literature review examines major theoretical approaches, empirical studies, and comparative perspectives related to phraseological units in English and African languages, with particular attention to cultural, cognitive, and translational dimensions.

Subsequent developments in anthropological linguistics highlighted the interdependence of language, culture, and cognition. Edward Sapir argued that language reflects cultural patterns and social organisation, while Benjamin Lee Whorf proposed that linguistic categories influence human perception and thought (Whorf, 1956). Within this framework, phraseological units are seen as culturally embedded

forms that encode collective experiences and value systems. Research inspired by linguistic relativity has demonstrated that idiomatic expressions often reveal culturally specific interpretations of nature, social relations, and morality (Lucy, 1997). This perspective is particularly relevant for African languages, where idioms and proverbs are closely tied to traditional worldviews and communal ethics.

A major shift in the study of idiomatic meaning occurred with the emergence of cognitive linguistics. The conceptual metaphor theory, developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), proposed that metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of human thought. According to this theory, abstract concepts are structured through mappings from concrete experiential domains. Research has shown that many phraseological units are motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY, EMOTIONS ARE FORCES, and TIME IS MONEY. These metaphors appear in both English and African languages, suggesting shared cognitive foundations, although their

linguistic realisations differ (Kövecses, 2010).

Within cognitive linguistics, scholars have emphasised the importance of embodiment and cultural context in shaping figurative language. Studies by Gibbs (2006) and Evans (2009) demonstrate that idiomatic meanings are grounded in bodily experience and cultural practices. For African languages, this implies that metaphors and idioms often reflect interaction with the natural environment, agricultural activities, and kinship systems. Cognitive approaches thus provide a valuable framework for comparing English and African phraseology at the conceptual level.

Corpus linguistics has also played a crucial role in advancing phraseological research. The pioneering work of John Sinclair emphasised the idiom principle, which states that language users rely heavily on semi-preconstructed phrases rather than generating sentences solely through grammatical rules (Sinclair, 1991). Corpus-based studies have revealed that collocations and fixed expressions are pervasive in spoken and written discourse. Research using large English corpora, such as the British

National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English, has documented patterns of frequency, variation, and pragmatic function in phraseological units (Stubbs, 2002).

However, comparable corpora for most African languages remain limited. This lack of digital resources has constrained large-scale quantitative research on African phraseology. Nevertheless, recent projects in language documentation and corpus development have begun to address this gap (McEntee-Atalianis & Amoakohene, 2021). Scholars increasingly combine corpus methods with ethnographic and qualitative approaches to analyse African idioms and proverbs within their cultural contexts. Lexicographic research has also contributed significantly to phraseological studies. Dictionaries of idioms and collocations, such as those compiled by Cowie (2001) and Spears (2005), provide systematic descriptions of English fixed expressions. These resources classify idioms according to semantic fields, grammatical patterns, and pragmatic usage. In contrast, the lexicographic documentation of African phraseology is often embedded in collections of proverbs, folktales, and

oral literature (Finnegan, 2012). Such works emphasise the moral and didactic functions of figurative language rather than formal linguistic classification.

Studies on African proverbs and idioms highlight their multifunctional role in social life. Yankah (2012) argues that proverbs in Akan discourse serve as rhetorical tools for persuasion, conflict resolution, and moral instruction. Similarly, Adegbija (2004) demonstrates that Yoruba idioms reflect communal values, respect for hierarchy, and religious beliefs. These studies suggest that African phraseological units function not only as linguistic devices but also as instruments of social regulation and cultural continuity. Comparative studies between English and African languages remain relatively limited, although interest in this area has grown in recent decades. Some researchers have focused on specific language pairs, such as English and Swahili (Mashauri, 2015) or English and Hausa (Abdulrahman, 2018). These studies reveal both shared metaphorical patterns and culturally specific imagery. For example, while both languages may use animal metaphors to describe human behaviour, the choice of animals and

associated traits often differs due to ecological and symbolic factors.

Cross-linguistic research by Kövecses (2010) suggests that metaphorical universals coexist with cultural variation. Universal bodily experiences give rise to similar conceptual metaphors, but cultural models shape their linguistic expression. This framework has been applied to African languages, showing how local beliefs and practices influence metaphorical motivation (Agyekum, 2010). Such findings support the view that comparative phraseology must integrate cognitive and cultural perspectives.

Translation studies have paid particular attention to phraseological units because of their resistance to literal rendering. Mona Baker (2018) identifies idioms as one of the most problematic elements in interlingual translation, as they often lack direct equivalents in the target language. Translators must choose between paraphrase, substitution with a culturally equivalent idiom, or omission. Research on African–English translation demonstrate that proverbs and idioms are frequently adapted to preserve pragmatic meaning rather than formal

structure (Bandia, 2008). In literary translation, the challenge of rendering African phraseology into English has been widely discussed. Authors such as Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o incorporate indigenous idioms into English texts, creating hybrid forms that reflect African cultural realities (Bandia, 2014). Studies on such works demonstrate how phraseological transfer contributes to linguistic creativity and cultural representation. These findings underscore the importance of comparative phraseological research for understanding postcolonial and multilingual literature.

Second language acquisition (SLA) research has increasingly recognised the importance of formulaic language. Alison Wray (2002) argues that the mastery of fixed expressions is essential for achieving fluency and native-like competence. Learners who lack phraseological knowledge often produce grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate utterances. Empirical studies show that explicit instruction in idioms and collocations improves learners' communicative effectiveness (Boers et al., 2014).

For African learners of English, phraseological competence is particularly challenging due to cultural differences in metaphorical conceptualisation (Siyanova-Chanturia & Martinez, 2015). Similarly, English speakers learning African languages face considerable difficulties in interpreting culturally embedded proverbs and idioms. Comparative studies could therefore inform pedagogical strategies by identifying areas of potential negative transfer and facilitating the development of culturally sensitive teaching materials.

Sociolinguistic research has examined the role of phraseological units in identity construction and social interaction. Studies by Holmes (2013) as well as Bucholtz and Hall (2005) demonstrate that idioms and set expressions contribute to the performance of social roles, group membership, and power relations. In African contexts, proverb usage is often associated with age, status, and authority, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies (Yankah, 2012). In English-speaking contexts, idiomatic competence is linked to insider knowledge and social belonging. These findings highlight the pragmatic and

ideological dimensions of phraseology. Recent interdisciplinary approaches have integrated linguistic, anthropological, and digital methods in the study of phraseological units. Computational linguistics has advanced tools for automatic idiom detection and classification, primarily for English and other major languages (Fazly et al., 2009). While such methods remain underdeveloped for African languages, they offer promising directions for future research. Digital humanities projects focusing on oral literature and proverb collections also contribute to the preservation and analysis of African phraseology. Despite significant progress, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most comparative studies focus on a limited number of African languages, leaving many linguistic communities underrepresented. Second, theoretical models developed primarily on the basis of Indo-European languages are often applied to African data without sufficient adaptation. Third, empirical research combining corpus analysis, ethnography, and experimental methods remains relatively rare in African contexts. Furthermore, few studies adopt

a truly balanced comparative perspective that gives equal weight to English and African languages. Research often treats English as the reference point and African languages as peripheral, which may reinforce linguistic hierarchies. A more symmetrical approach is needed to recognise the theoretical and cultural value of African phraseology.

In summary, the existing literature demonstrates that phraseological units are central to linguistic structure, cognitive processing, and cultural expression. Structuralist, cognitive, corpus-based, and sociocultural approaches have all contributed to the understanding of their nature and function. Studies on English phraseology are extensive and methodologically diverse, while research on African languages has emphasised oral tradition, cultural meaning, and social function. Comparative and translational studies reveal both universal cognitive patterns and culturally specific features. However, comprehensive cross-cultural analyses that integrate these perspectives remain limited. The present study seeks to address this gap by providing a systematic comparison of phraseological

units in selected African languages and English, drawing on cognitive, cultural, and functional frameworks. By synthesising insights from previous research, the present research aims to contribute to a more inclusive and theoretically informed understanding of global phraseology.

Methodology

The present study used a qualitative–comparative research design to analyse phraseological units in selected African languages and English from semantic, cognitive, and cultural perspectives. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth interpretation of linguistic data within its socio-cultural context and supports meaningful cross-linguistic comparison. The study is guided by theoretical principles from cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, and translation studies, particularly the conceptual metaphor framework by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, along with functional approaches to phraseology. The research employed a mixed qualitative method combining descriptive, comparative, and interpretive techniques. The descriptive method is utilised to identify and classify phraseological units in each language.

The comparative method is used to examine the similarities and differences across languages, while the interpretive approach was adopted to analyse cultural meanings and pragmatic functions embedded in phraseological expressions. This study does not aim to quantify frequencies statistically but rather to explore patterns of meaning, metaphorical motivation, and cultural symbolism. This approach aligns with previous phraseological studies that emphasise contextual and semantic depth (Kövecses, 2010; Wray, 2002). The research focuses on English and three African languages representing different linguistic and cultural regions:

1. Yoruba (Niger-Congo family, West Africa)
2. Swahili (Bantu branch, East Africa)
3. Hausa (Afroasiatic family, West Africa)

These languages were selected due to their wide geographical distribution, sociolinguistic importance, and availability of linguistic documentation. English was selected as a global lingua franca with extensive phraseological resources.

Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure reliability and representativeness:

1. **Dictionaries and reference works**
Idiom and proverb dictionaries in English, Yoruba, Swahili, and Hausa were consulted. English data were obtained from established phraseological dictionaries (Cowie, 2001; Spears, 2005), while African language data were drawn from proverb collections and bilingual dictionaries.
2. **Literary texts**
Selected novels, short stories, and plays written in English and African languages were analysed. African literature written in English that incorporates indigenous idioms was also included to examine language contact phenomena.
3. **Oral data**
Recordings and transcriptions of traditional narratives, interviews, and public speeches were examined. Where direct access was limited, published transcriptions were used.
4. **Corpus materials**
English corpora such as the British National Corpus and selected online

databases were used. For African languages, available digital corpora and annotated text collections were consulted.

A total of approximately 1,200 phraseological units were collected, including idioms, proverbs, metaphorical expressions, and fixed collocations. Purposive sampling was employed to select phraseological units that met the following criteria:

- Semantic opacity or partial opacity

- Frequent or culturally significant usage
- Presence of metaphorical or symbolic elements
- Relevance to social, moral, or emotional domains

From the initial dataset, 600 units (150 per language) were selected for detailed analysis. This ensured a balanced representation and manageable scope. The collected phraseological units were classified according to four main parameters:

Table 1. Structural types of phraseological units

Structural type	Description	English example	African language example (Glossed)	Meaning
Idioms	Fixed expressions with figurative meaning	Spill the beans	<i>Qkàn rẹ̀ sà̀n bí omi</i> (Yoruba: "heart flows like water")	Reveal a secret
Proverbs	Traditional sayings expressing wisdom	A stitch in time saves nine	<i>Haraka haraka haina baraka</i> (Swahili)	Haste brings loss
Collocations	Frequent word combinations	Make a decision	<i>Yin kokari</i> (Hausa: "make effort")	Try hard
Routine formulas	Conventional social expressions	Nice to meet you	<i>Sannu da zuwa</i> (Hausa: "welcome")	Greeting

Table 2. Semantic domains of phraseological units

Semantic domain	Focus area	English example	African language example (Glossed)	Interpretation
Emotions	Feelings and psychological states	Broken-hearted	<i>Ọkàn mi dún</i> (Yoruba: "my heart is sweet")	Feeling happy
Social Relations	Interpersonal behavior	Keep in touch	<i>Umoja ni nguvu</i> (Swahili: "unity is strength")	Cooperation
Morality	Ethical values	Clean hands	<i>Mutum nagari</i> (Hausa: "good person")	Honesty
Work and Livelihood	Labor and survival	Earn a living	<i>Jasho la mtu</i> (Swahili: "one's sweat")	Hard work
Nature and Environment	Natural phenomena	Weather the storm	<i>Ruwan sama ya albarka</i> (Hausa: "blessed rain")	Endure hardship
Power and Authority	Leadership and control	Hold the reins	<i>Olóri ilú</i> (Yoruba: "head of town")	Leadership

Table 3. Metaphorical motivation of phraseological units

Metaphorical type	Source domain	English example	African language example (Glossed)	Conceptual meaning
Body-based metaphors	Human body	Cold-hearted	<i>Zuciya mai sanyi</i> (Hausa: "cold heart")	Lack of empathy
Animal metaphors	Animal behavior	As sly as a fox	<i>Kama kura</i> (Swahili: "like a hyena")	Deceitfulness

Metaphorical type	Source domain	English example	African language example (Glossed)	Conceptual meaning
Spatial metaphors	Space and movement	On the right path	<i>Njọ ònà rere</i> (Yoruba: "walk good road")	Moral correctness
Agricultural metaphors	Farming activities	Reap what you sow	<i>Ukulima huvuna</i> (Swahili: "farming is harvest")	Consequences
Religious and spiritual metaphors	Spiritual belief	God's will	<i>In sha Allah</i> (Hausa/Arabic: "if God wills")	Divine control

Table 4. Pragmatic functions of phraseological units

Pragmatic function	Communicative purpose	English example	African language example (Glossed)	Usage context
Advice and Instruction	Guiding behavior	Look before you leap	<i>Ka yi tunani kafin ka yi aiki</i> (Hausa)	Giving counsel
Criticism and Warning	Indirect reproach	Playing with fire	<i>È n'şeré pèlú iná</i> (Yoruba: "playing with fire")	Warning
Praise and Encouragement	Expressing approval	Well done	<i>Kazi nzuri</i> (Swahili: "good work")	Motivation
Conflict Resolution	Restoring harmony	Let bygones be bygones	<i>Amani kwanza</i> (Swahili: "peace first")	Mediation
Identity Construction	Expressing group belonging	True blue	<i>Dan kasa nagari</i> (Hausa: "true citizen")	Social identity

These tables demonstrate that phraseological units in English and African languages share common structural and conceptual foundations while reflecting distinct cultural experiences. African languages show stronger links to communal life, nature, and spirituality, whereas English phraseology emphasises individual agency, efficiency, and abstraction. This comparative classification highlights the linguistic and cultural richness of phraseological systems and supports their relevance for translation, education, and intercultural communication. This classification framework was adapted from previous studies in cognitive and functional linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010).

The analysis was conducted in several stages:

First, each phraseological unit was examined for literal meaning, figurative meaning, and contextual usage. This stage involved semantic decomposition and pragmatic interpretation.

Second, conceptual metaphors underlying the expressions were identified. For example, expressions related to emotional control were analysed within the framework of EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL FORCES.

Third, cultural references embedded in the units were interpreted through ethnographic and historical sources. This enabled the identification of culturally specific symbols, practices, and beliefs.

Fourth, cross-linguistic comparison was performed to determine equivalence patterns, partial correspondences, and non-equivalence. Special attention was paid to translation strategies discussed by Mona Baker.

To enhance reliability, data were triangulated across dictionaries, literary texts, and oral sources. Furthermore, peer consultation with specialists in African linguistics was conducted to verify interpretations. Validity was ensured through contextual analysis and reference to established cultural studies. Each interpretation was supported by

multiple examples and secondary sources. Ethical considerations included respect for cultural heritage and the accurate representation of traditional knowledge. Furthermore, all sources were properly acknowledged in accordance with academic integrity standards.

Results

The outcomes of the research reveal significant patterns in the structure, meaning, and cultural functions of phraseological units in English and the selected African languages. While many similarities were identified at the conceptual level, substantial differences emerged in metaphorical imagery, pragmatic usage, and cultural orientation. Analysis indicate that all four languages employ similar structural categories of phraseological units: idioms, proverbs, collocations, and routine formulas. However, their distribution and prominence vary. In English, idioms and collocations dominated the dataset, accounting for approximately 65% of the analysed units. Examples include fixed verb-object constructions and prepositional idioms. Proverbs constituted a smaller proportion and were mainly used in formal or literary contexts. In Yoruba,

Swahili, and Hausa, proverbs and metaphorical sayings represented nearly 55% of the data. These units were frequently embedded in everyday speech and public discourse. Idioms were present but often closely related to proverb-like structures. African phraseological units showed greater syntactic flexibility, allowing for limited variation without loss of meaning. English idioms, by contrast, tended to exhibit greater structural rigidity.

Semantic domains

The analysis revealed that certain semantic domains were dominant across all languages:

1. Social relations
2. Morality and ethics
3. Work and survival
4. Emotions
5. Power and authority

In English, expressions related to work, success, and personal achievement were especially frequent. Idioms such as *climb the ladder* and *break the ice* reflected individualistic and pragmatic orientations. In African languages, social relations and moral values were more

prominent. Proverbs emphasising cooperation, respect for elders, and communal responsibility were widespread. For example, many Yoruba and Hausa expressions highlight the importance of collective harmony. Environmental and agricultural domains were significantly more emphasised in African languages. Metaphors involving farming, rainfall, livestock, and seasons appeared frequently, reflecting close interaction with nature.

Metaphorical patterns

At the conceptual level, several universal metaphors were identified across all languages:

- LIFE IS A JOURNEY
- EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL STATES
- KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT
- DIFFICULTY IS A BURDEN

These metaphors support the cognitive universality hypothesis proposed by Lakoff and Johnson. However, cultural variation was evident in source domains. In English, metaphors frequently drew on mechanical, industrial, and financial imagery. For example, emotional exhaustion was conceptualised through machine metaphors. In African

languages, metaphors were more strongly linked to natural and social environments. Emotional states were often represented through weather, animal behaviour, or agricultural processes. Animal metaphors constituted a major category in African languages. Different animals symbolised specific character traits, such as wisdom, deceit, or laziness. In English, animal metaphors were present but less central. Phraseological units served diverse pragmatic functions in all languages, but their relative importance differed. In English, idioms were primarily used to enhance conversational fluency, express evaluation, and create informality. They contributed to stylistic variation and interpersonal rapport. In African languages, proverbs and idioms played a more explicit didactic role. They were commonly used to advise, criticise indirectly, and resolve conflicts. Elder speakers frequently employed proverbs to assert authority and transmit moral lessons. Public speeches and traditional ceremonies in African contexts demonstrated dense proverb usage, whereas English formal discourse relied more on abstract vocabulary and rhetorical devices.

Cultural values and worldviews

The outcomes indicate that phraseological units reflect underlying cultural models.

English phraseology emphasized		African phraseology emphasised
Individual responsibility	Expressions such as <i>stand on your own two feet</i> illustrate these values	Communal solidarity
Efficiency and productivity		Respect for hierarchy
Personal autonomy		Spiritual awareness
Competition		Social harmony

Proverbs stressing interdependence and collective survival were dominant.

Religious and spiritual metaphors were more frequent in African languages, reflecting the integration of belief systems into everyday communication. English expressions with religious origins were present but often secularised.

1. *Phraseological units in English and African languages share universal cognitive foundations.*
2. *Cultural environment significantly shapes metaphorical imagery.*
3. *African languages rely more heavily on proverbs and moral discourse.*

4. *English phraseology reflects industrial and individualistic values.*

5. *Translation and language teaching require culturally informed strategies.*

These findings confirm that a comprehensive understanding of phraseological units requires integration of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural perspectives. The comparative approach adopted in this research demonstrates the richness and diversity of global phraseology and highlights the importance of African languages in theoretical linguistics.

Discussion

The present research aimed to examine phraseological units in English and selected African languages from structural, semantic, metaphorical, and pragmatic perspectives. The findings demonstrate that while phraseological systems across languages share common cognitive foundations, they are profoundly shaped by cultural experience, ecological environment, and social organisation. This discussion interprets these findings in light of existing linguistic theories and illustrates them through detailed examples. One of the most significant findings of this research is the coexistence of universal and language-specific patterns in phraseological systems. At the structural level, all analysed languages employ idioms, proverbs, collocations, and routine formulas. This supports the view that phraseological units constitute a fundamental component of linguistic competence rather than a marginal phenomenon. From a structuralist perspective, these findings are consistent with the notion that fixed expressions function as conventional signs within a linguistic system, as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. For example, the

English idiom *spill the beans* operates as a stable sign whose meaning ("reveal a secret") cannot be derived from its components. Similarly, the Yoruba expression *òkàn rẹ̀ sàń bí omi* ("his heart flows like water") conveys emotional openness and sincerity through a fixed metaphorical structure. Despite these similarities, the degree of rigidity differs across languages. English idioms such as *kick the bucket* or *burn the midnight oil* allow very limited variation, whereas African idioms and proverbs often permit syntactic flexibility. For instance, a Swahili proverb like *Haraka haraka haina baraka* ("haste has no blessing") may appear in shortened or expanded forms without losing its core meaning. This flexibility reflects the strong oral tradition of African societies, where expressions are adapted dynamically to communicative contexts.

These findings also support the argument advanced by formulaic language researchers that speakers rely heavily on prefabricated units in everyday communication. In this regard, the present findings align with the work of Alison Wray, who emphasises that fluency depends largely on access to

stored expressions rather than solely on grammatical creativity. At the conceptual level, the analysis confirms the central role of metaphor in shaping phraseological meaning. Many expressions in both English and African languages are motivated by shared conceptual metaphors, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY, EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL STATES, and KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT. This supports the cognitive framework developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. For example, the English expression *at a crossroads in life* conceptualises personal decision-making as physical movement. A similar idea appears in Yoruba *òṅà ayé ní yà* ("the road of life divides"), which expresses moral or existential choice. Although the linguistic forms differ, both rely on the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, suggesting a shared cognitive basis. However, the source domains from which metaphors are drawn vary significantly. English phraseology frequently draws on industrial, mechanical, and economic imagery. Expressions such as *run out of steam*, *back to square one*, and *time is money* reflect historical experiences of industrialisation and capitalist organisation. In contrast, African

languages rely heavily on natural, agricultural, and social imagery. For instance, Swahili expressions such as *kupanda mbegu za chuki* ("to plant seeds of hatred") and Hausa *ruwa ya wuce kai* ("water has passed the head") conceptualise emotional or social crises through farming and environmental metaphors. Animal metaphors further illustrate this contrast. In English, *as sly as a fox* or *a lone wolf* reflect individualistic character traits. In African languages, animal metaphors often encode communal moral values. For example, Yoruba *ẹkùn í jẹun lókòṣàkan* ("the tiger eats alone") criticises selfishness, while Swahili *kama fisi* ("like a hyena") conveys greed or opportunism. These examples demonstrate that metaphorical meaning is shaped not only by bodily experience but also by culturally salient symbols. The dominance of certain semantic domains in African and English phraseology reveals significant cultural priorities. In English, expressions related to work, efficiency, and achievement are particularly prominent. Idioms such as *climb the corporate ladder*, *pull yourself up by your bootstraps*, and *burn the candle at both ends* emphasise self-

reliance, ambition, and productivity. These reflect the values of individualism and competition characteristic of many Western societies.

By contrast, African phraseological systems prioritise social harmony, morality, and communal responsibility. Proverbs such as the Swahili *umoja ni nguvu* ("unity is strength") and the Hausa *hannu ɗaya baya tafi* ("one hand cannot clap") stress cooperation and interdependence. Similarly, Yoruba expressions emphasising respect for elders and family obligations highlight the centrality of kinship networks.

Moral discourse is especially prominent in African phraseology. Proverbs function as tools for ethical instruction and social regulation. For example, the Akan proverb *nea onnim no sua a, ohu* ("he who does not know learns to know") encourages humility and lifelong learning. Such expressions are often used by elders to guide younger generations, thereby reinforcing social continuity. English also possesses moral idioms, such as *clean hands* and *play fair*, but these are less frequently embedded in extended proverbial discourse. Instead, moral meanings are often conveyed

through abstract vocabulary rather than metaphorical narratives. This difference reflects broader cultural patterns in communication styles. The pragmatic analysis indicates that phraseological units play crucial roles in managing social interaction. In English, idioms are commonly used to create informality, humor, and interpersonal closeness. Expressions such as *break the ice*, *hit it off*, and *on the same wavelength* facilitate rapport and reduce social distance.

In African contexts, proverbs and idioms serve more overtly strategic functions. They are frequently used to criticise, advise, or warn indirectly. For instance, instead of openly accusing someone of irresponsibility, a Yoruba speaker might say *omọ tí a kò kọ́, yóò gbé ilé tí a kọ́ tà* ("a child who is not trained will sell the house built by others"). This indirectness preserves social harmony while conveying disapproval. Conflict resolution represents another significant pragmatic domain. In Swahili-speaking communities, expressions such as *amani kwanza* ("peace first") are used during disputes to encourage reconciliation. Similarly, Hausa proverbs emphasising

patience and restraint are used by mediators to defuse tension. In English, conflict resolution often relies more on explicit negotiation strategies and legal discourse than on proverb-based mediation. Identity construction also emerges as a key function of phraseology. In English, expressions such as *true blue* or *self-made man* signal group membership and personal values. In African languages, identity-related expressions usually emphasise communal belonging, as in Hausa *ɗan kasa nagari* ("good citizen") or Yoruba *omolúàbí* ("person of good character"). These units reinforce collective norms and social expectations.

One of the most challenging aspects of phraseological comparison concerns translation and equivalence. The present findings confirm that direct correspondence between English and African idioms is relatively rare. This supports the theoretical framework proposed by Mona Baker, who distinguishes between full equivalence, partial equivalence, and non-equivalence. Full equivalence occurs when similar metaphors and meanings coincide, as in English *time heals all*

wounds and Swahili *muda huponya majeraha*. Partial equivalence involves similar meanings expressed through different imagery. For example, English *don't put all your eggs in one basket* corresponds functionally to Hausa *kada ka dora dukkan kaya a rakumi ɗaya* ("do not load all goods on one camel"). Non-equivalence is common in culturally specific expressions, such as ritual-related proverbs or kinship metaphors, which lack direct counterparts. In such cases, translators often resort to paraphrase or functional substitution. For instance, the Yoruba proverb *ilé la ti ní kọ' esọ́ r'ode* ("charity begins at home") may be translated using the English equivalent proverb rather than literally. While this strategy preserves pragmatic meaning, it risks erasing cultural specificity. The discussion highlights the need for culturally sensitive translation practices that balance intelligibility with authenticity.

The findings have significant implications for second language acquisition. Learners frequently struggle with idiomatic expressions because they attempt to interpret them literally or transfer metaphors from their first

language. African learners of English may produce expressions such as *my heart is hot* (influenced by indigenous metaphors for anger) instead of *I am angry*. Conversely, English learners of African languages may misinterpret proverbs as simple statements rather than culturally loaded discourse acts. These difficulties support the argument that phraseological competence involves cultural as well as linguistic knowledge. Instruction focusing solely on grammar and vocabulary is insufficient. Instead, learners must be exposed to metaphorical motivation, usage contexts, and pragmatic norms. Teaching materials that compare indigenous and English idioms can help learners develop intercultural awareness and reduce negative transfer.

Beyond communicative functions, phraseological units also encode ideological positions and worldviews. English expressions emphasising self-reliance and competition reflect neoliberal economic ideologies. Phrases such as *survival of the fittest* and *dog-eat-dog world* normalise competitive social relations. African phraseology, by contrast, often promotes collective

responsibility and moral accountability. Proverbs condemning greed, arrogance, and disrespect function as mechanisms of social control. For example, the Swahili proverb *mtaka yote hukosa yote* ("he who wants everything loses everything") discourages excessive ambition and selfishness. Religious and spiritual metaphors further illustrate ideological differences. African languages frequently integrate spiritual beliefs into everyday discourse. Expressions invoking divine will, ancestral guidance, or fate are common. Although English retains religious idioms such as *God willing* or *act of God*, these are often used in secularised contexts. This reflects different degrees of integration of spirituality into daily life. The findings of this research have several theoretical implications. First, they support an integrated model of phraseology that combines structural, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives. Neither purely formal nor purely cognitive approaches are sufficient to explain the complexity of fixed expressions. Second, the findings challenge Eurocentric biases in linguistic theory. Much phraseological research has been based on Indo-European

languages, particularly English. The present analysis demonstrates that African languages offer rich data that can refine and expand existing models. For example, the prominence of proverbs in African discourse suggests that phraseology should be studied not only as lexical phenomena but also as a set of discourse practice. Third, the research highlights the importance of ecological and historical factors in metaphor formation. Industrialisation, agriculture, pastoralism, and religious traditions all leave traces in phraseological systems. These factors must be considered in any comprehensive theory of figurative language.

Conclusion

The discussion demonstrates that phraseological units in English and African languages are shaped by shared cognitive principles and distinct cultural

experiences. Universal metaphors coexist with culturally specific imagery derived from environment, social organisation, and belief systems. African phraseology emphasises communal values, moral instruction, and spiritual awareness, while English phraseology reflects individualism, efficiency, and industrial experience. Through detailed analysis of idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions, this research shows that phraseology is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a repository of collective memory, ideology, and identity. A comparative perspective not only enhances theoretical understanding but also contributes to more effective translation, language teaching, and intercultural communication. By foregrounding African languages in phraseological research, this study promotes a more inclusive and globally relevant linguistics.

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