

## Historical Reflection on the Formation Process of Expressions: Cultural Diversity of Idioms

**Nanuka Shavshishvili**

Candidate for the Master's Degree in Anglistics  
Gori State University  
Chavchavadze Street #53, Gori, 1400, Georgia  
+995598431805

[nanukashavshishvili1@gmail.com](mailto:nanukashavshishvili1@gmail.com)  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1913-8248>

---

**Abstract** Most nations all around the world perceive a particular event in a unique way and express it in a distinctive manner suitable for their language, which is mainly the result of particular historical and cultural experiences. This paper discusses the connection between history, culture, and language. It recognizes the influence of English colonists on American English and the archaic forms which are preserved by the latter. The influence of historical-cultural processes on the formation of idioms is also an area of discussion, and the preconditions for the origin of the idioms such as “it is raining cats and dogs”, “break a leg” and “under the weather” gives us a clue about the importance of the events that happened to the native speakers of the language.

*Keywords:* Cultural diversity, expressions, historical background, idioms, language formation

---

### Introduction

Different languages have gotten their present forms because of different kinds of influences. Distinctive factors in different languages have formed expressions of different compositions but with the same contents, and now these expressions shape the consciousness of the native speakers of the language. Historical and cultural factors had the biggest influence on language and people. They left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the speakers of a particular language, which was later reflected in the vocabulary and established itself in the language forever. In this work, the main attention will be paid to the idioms and various expressions created in the background of national historical and cultural experience and a specific viewpoint.

### Research Question

This research has a specific area that refers to the historical and cultural background in the consciousness of different nations that later led to the creation of particular expressions. But are they

really that important for the language? The research question which seeks to consider their importance is the following: Do non-linguistic circumstances have a significant influence on language?

### Methods

While searching for the available information for any kind of work, it is important to choose the method. One of the methods for research is the traditional one, which includes reviewing published books and articles relevant to the topic. According to the importance of the information that the work provides, we can use different reading techniques, including skimming, scanning, and in-depth reading. Access to any kind of literature is simplified with the help of the Internet. In this case, some linguistic articles from the journals are very useful and easily located on the Internet. Reviewing the published works gives us a clue about what is already known, and investigated, providing us a broad view of specific information about the subject we want to research.

After gathering the desired information, we need to evaluate what we understand, what kind of information we want to highlight, or what kind of information we need to investigate further. Then, starts a more profound and more focused process of research, which requires connecting facts, critical thinking, evaluating information, and making conclusions.

### Results

After discussing the given examples, it is doubtless that language is constantly changing due to particular factors. In this case, the main role is the historical background and cultural dynamics which affected the English language and played an important role in the language development process. Although history and culture are not directly related to language, they are one of the most crucial factors in the process of vocabulary formation, because they occupy a major place in people's consciousness, and because of this, they are reflected in language.

### Culture, History, and Language

When we learn a new language, we always need to learn about its culture and history, to facilitate the learning process. No translation can convey the exact sense of the original because the meaning of a language's words depends on the underlying culture. Communicating in another language requires the ability to recognize and express the ideas and customs of a culture different from our own, to comprehend how it constructs reality, and understands the world (Datta, 2017). Language does not exist without culture. Culture is the central core that contributed to the formation of language. In turn, culture is formed based on historical circumstances, according to the experiences or environmental factors in which people had to live, and it always remains a part of history.

We can look at the origin of one of the oldest European languages, such as Ogham, and realize the connection between language and culture, which includes people's beliefs. The Ogham language was based on nature, to be more

precise - trees like ash, aspen, oak, etc. Each symbol of this language can be translated as a letter, but also it denotes a specific tree. Ogham originated in Ireland, where nature was perceived as part and parcel of the pagan belief system of the culture (Madison, and Chapel, 2019)

### Differences in Vocabularies of the English Language and Factors that Impact Language

Over 7000 languages are spoken around the world, and every language has a different way of describing the world; thus, languages develop distinctive perspectives in people's thoughts. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity emphasizes that the structure of the language affects speakers' perceptions, and they pay attention to different aspects of reality (Duranti, 1999). Subjective perception is influenced by language. People who speak different languages often use different words to express the same concept; for instance, in English, we say "Happy birthday" to express good wishes to the one who has the birthday, but in Georgian we say "გილოცავ დაბადების დღეს" (congratulations on your birthday) to express that it is a special day for the birthday celebrant. In this case, the word "happy" is replaced by congratulations, and although they do not have a similar definition, they are used to indicate the same concept in two different languages.

Differences and changes in languages are highly influenced by migration, culture, the living conditions of natives, religion, and technical progress. Language shift is widely spread and can be found in every literal language. It is frequently associated with immigrant groups who take up the majority language of their new territory, leaving behind the language of their homeland. For minority-language speaker communities, language shift is generally the result of a combination of factors, in particular, colonization (Grenoble, Lenore, 2021). For example, the English language was brought to America by colonists from England in the 17th century. Since then, English has been variously affected in America. It was influenced first, by later migrations from England and other

lands, and second, by local influences and the development of national life, which led to some considerable changes in vocabulary.

Changes in vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling are so considerable that some Americans claim it is no longer English, but American English. American English preserved old features of the language that have gone out of use in the standard speech of England. For example, they pronounce “either”, and “neither” with [i:], while in England these words have changed their pronunciation since the American colonies were established and are now pronounced with a diphthong [ai]. The Americans have preserved a number of old words or old uses of words no longer common in England. They still use “mad” in the sense of “angry”, as Shakespeare and his contemporaries did. They also kept the word “fall” to signify autumn (Kraveishvili, 1998). In addition, Americans use the word “boot” to denote a shoe, while in England, it means the trunk of a car.

### Cultural (Historical) Role in the Formation Process of Idioms

If we discuss idioms in the context of cultural dynamics, we realize how they were created under the influence of society, what were the reasons for creating such expressions, different perspectives, and the varieties of idioms in different cultures. Idioms are expanded through languages, and again, the same meaning is perceived in different words in different languages. The culture and historical background have their role in creating this variety, and it has a different effect on people’s thinking, emotional cognition, and imagination because idioms are good for highlighting meaning and making it more memorable, dramatic, and deep. Different societies have a unique national understanding of the facts because they had completely different experiences based on their lifestyle. Accordingly, they perceive different words with different emotions. For example, when we hear “it is raining”, we just imagine that some small drops of water are falling from the sky. But if someone says “it is raining cats and dogs” our mind is a bit agitated, we see how a huge amount

of water is pouring from thick, black clouds and making big puddles in the streets. We see that some animals may drown, it gets terrifying and dangerous, then the desire comes to go to the window and see it all with our own eyes, and that is the power of idioms.

### Figure 1

#### *An English Idiom*



*Very unpleasant weather or The old saying verified: Raining cats, dogs, and pitchforks* (1820); published 1835 from the Cruikshankiana series, published by Thomas McLean, London, 1835 George Cruikshank (etcher), A. E. (draughtsman)

We can analyze idioms in the cultural context. If we compare different languages, we can see that they sometimes have dissimilar phrases for expressing the same concept, which is mainly due to the particular viewpoint or experience of each society. The widest-spread etymology of the phrase “it is raining cats and dogs” has its historical background in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. City streets were filthy, drainage systems were poor and heavy rain would occasionally carry along dead animals that slept during the night on the eaves of houses. When it rained heavily, the water washed them off the eaves, and they came down with a torrent of water (Martin G., 2017). As it appeared as though the cats and dogs had fallen with the rain, the term “raining cats and dogs” was born. Here we have some examples that different cultures have different perspectives. For instance, in Spanish, we have the following idioms: “Caer

chuzos de punta” (Dropping spiked sticks), “Llueve a mares” (It’s raining seas), or “Llover a cántaros” (To rain jugs). “Caer chuzos de punta” (Dropping spiked sticks) “Chuzo” comes from the Swiss word, since, in the past, the Swiss soldiers carried sticks as weapons that had a spike, which seriously damaged their enemies. By saying, “they drop spiked sticks;” the rain is being compared with the sticks that the Swiss soldiers threw since even heavy water falling can also do damage. “Llueve a mares” (It is raining seas) expresses that very much water is falling down from the sky; if we say “Llover a cántaros” (To rain jugs) it is like someone is pouring water out of jugs.

It is interesting that in Georgian, we have the exact equivalent of “Llover a cántaros” (To rain jugs), which sounds like “კოკისპირული წვიმა” and means that water flows out of the mouth of a filled koka, the traditional Georgian version of jug (Cántaro). In Georgian, we have another idiom “თავსმა წვიმა” (the rain which pours on one’s head) which directly describes that strong raindrops are falling on someone’s head. These demonstrate the cultural variety of idioms: sometimes the same meaning is expressed by unique subjects, which can be caused by different cultural circumstances and distinct perceptions.

Another example that reflects different viewpoints of each society in language can be the idiom “break a leg”. For non-English speakers, this phrase can be associated with a bad wish, but in English, it is used to wish someone good luck. Some believe that it was adapted from the German *Hals- und Beinbruch!*, literally meaning “[broken] neck and a broken leg.” (Wilton, 2011). Others say that the idiom refers to deep bowing at the end of a successful play or bending to pick up monetary tips, which was a common practice in earlier days. The most widely spread opinion is that it is based on superstition (Helterbran, 2008), as it is believed to be rooted in the theatre community, which is known to be superstitious. Performers believed that saying “good luck” would actually bring bad luck on the stage, so they would

tell one another to “break a leg” instead and that way, the opposite would happen. (Martin 2010).

In Italian, the same meaning can be expressed by the idiom “in bocca al lupo!” (“in the mouth of the wolf!”). Its origin is not very clear, but one of the interpretations suggests that it is connected to the ancient myth of the foundation of the city of Rome. The legend tells the story of two orphan twins, Romulus and Remus, who were rescued and suckled by a female wolf. It is more likely that the wolf took the toddlers to a cave, in the land where later, an adult Romulus established the city of Rome, becoming its founder and first king (Ferrari, 2023).

According to this interpretation, the expression “in bocca al lupo!” is meant to be a wish for protection, prosperity, and the potential for great things by being safe in the mouth of the wolf. However, this interpretation, honoring the female wolf and her motherly nature does not match with the answer that follows the idiom: “crepi!” (colloquial for “may the wolf die!”), which suggests that the expression wishes you to be safe from the mouth of the ferocious wolf (Ferrari, 2023).

In addition to this, Italian animal lovers suggested changing the answer from “crepi!” (may the wolf die!) to “viva!” (long live the wolf!). But know that changing a commonly used expression like that is never an easy task, even when it might be for good reasons (Ferrari, 2023). However, this attempt gives an example of the necessity of changes in language, as new generations perceive the ideas differently. If earlier, killing animals was a common thing, nowadays, it is getting more and more unacceptable, and because of this, it is also getting unpleasant to have such expressions in language.

The last idiom we are going to discuss is “under the weather”, it describes feeling ill, being unwell, and hung over from drinking too much alcohol. Under the weather originates from maritime language. When a sailor became ill or seasick, more frequently because of violent weather conditions, that sailor was sent below



decks to the most stable part of the ship, which was under the weather rail. The phrase under the weather rail was shortened to the idiom under the weather. This expression appears in the mid-1800s, and even though travel by ship has waned, the idiom under the weather is still a popular term (Grammarist, 2022). All these idioms are examples of how ongoing, non-linguistic but historical or cultural events or habits can be reflected in language. Even though these events are already far from today's reality, the phrases describing them still survive in the language and are still actively used in modern speech.

### Discussion

The research had to ascertain whether non-linguistic factors can cause significant changes in languages. or not. As we evaluate the above-mentioned examples, we can easily conclude that language is greatly influenced by historical and cultural circumstances. They are deeply embedded in human consciousness, and then they find a way of expressing their experience in the form of words. Depending on distinctive cultural habits, different languages have dissimilar expressions for denoting the same concept, as revealed by the examples cited. Language is a living phenomenon that is constantly evolving. The main actors in the development process of language are the people or circumstances that provoke such phenomena that cause changes in the language. Therefore, even events that are not related to linguistics can be indirect participants and have a great influence on the process of language formation and transformation.

### References

- Datta, V. (2017). The power of history, language & culture. The Albright Institute.  
<https://www.wellesley.edu/albright/about/bl-og/3296-power-history-language-culture>
- Duranti, A. (1999). Relativity. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 9(1/2), 220-222.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43102471>
- Ferrari, L. (2023.). "In bocca al lupo!": Origins of the famous expression.  
<https://www.italianschool.sg/in-bocca-al-lupo-origins-of-the-famous-expression/>
- Grenoble, L. A. (2021). Language shift. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.347>
- Helterbran, V. R. (2008). *Exploring idioms: A critical-thinking resource for grades 4-8*. Maupin House Publishing.
- Kraveishvili, M. (1998). *History of the English language*. Ganatleba.
- Madison, E., & Chapel, L. (2019). How language reflects culture & affects meaning.  
<https://study.com/academy/lesson/how-language-reflects-culture-affects-meaning.html>
- Martin G. (2010) Break a leg..  
<https://phrases.org.uk/meanings/break-a-leg.html>
- Martin G. (2017). Raining cats and dogs.  
<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/rainin-g-cats-and-dogs.html>
- Grammarist. (2022). Under the weather.  
<https://grammarist.com/idiom/under-the-weather/>
- Wilton, D. (2008). *Word myths: Debunking linguistic urban legends*. Oxford University Press.

### Author's Note



**Nanuka Shavshishvili** is 24 years old and lives in Gori, Georgia. She completed her Bachelor's Degree in English Philology from Gori State University and she will obtain her Master's Degree in Anglistics from the same university at the end of the current semester. Nanuka considers sociolinguistics to be a deep and interesting topic, especially the interconnection between language, people, and culture. She hopes her research paper will be interesting to readers and encourage them to reflect on social experiences and language.