

## EMBODIED EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL MODELS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

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**Abstract.** *This study explores how English idioms are shaped and interpreted through the interaction of embodied experience and cultural models. Drawing on cognitive linguistics, it argues that idioms are not arbitrary expressions but meaningful conceptualizations grounded in bodily experience and culturally shared knowledge. Embodied cognition explains how idioms originate from universal image schemas such as movement, force, and containment, while cultural models account for culturally specific values reflected in idiomatic meanings. The research demonstrates that English idioms encode key Anglo-American ideals, including individualism, time discipline, and emotional control.*

**Keywords:** *embodiment, cultural models, English idioms, cognitive linguistics, image schemas, metaphor, cultural values, conceptualization.*

### INTRODUCTION

Idiomatic expressions constitute a significant and culturally marked component of the English lexicon, reflecting both the collective worldview and the embodied experiences of its speakers. In recent decades, cognitive linguistics has offered a powerful framework for understanding idioms not as arbitrary linguistic units, but as meaningful conceptualizations grounded in human bodily experience and culturally shared models. Within this framework, idioms act as windows into the ways societies perceive reality, organize knowledge, and transmit values. Therefore, examining English idioms through the lenses of embodied cognition and cultural models provides valuable insights into how language users conceptualize abstract domains by drawing upon physical experience and culturally specific schemas.

The concept of embodiment in cognitive linguistics posits that human cognition is fundamentally shaped by the body's interaction with the physical environment. This perspective suggests that idioms often rely on image schemas – such as UP–DOWN, CONTAINER, BALANCE, and FORCE – that originate in basic bodily experiences and structure the way speakers metaphorically reason about abstract concepts. For example, idioms like “keep your head above water” or “rise to the occasion” derive part of their meaning from embodied spatial orientations linked to survival, motion, and verticality. Such idioms reveal how English encodes cultural understandings of struggle, success, and agency through bodily-grounded metaphorical mappings.

Complementing embodied cognition, the theory of cultural models highlights the shared beliefs, values, and social expectations that shape linguistic meaning within a particular community. English idioms frequently encode culturally salient notions such as individualism, self-reliance, time discipline, and pragmatic problem-solving. Expressions like “pull yourself together,” “go the extra mile,” or “time is money” illustrate the cultural patterns that characterize Anglo-American thought – especially those related to personal



responsibility and productivity. Thus, cultural models provide an essential dimension for explaining why certain idioms emerge, how they are interpreted by native speakers, and why some of them pose difficulties for learners from different linguistic backgrounds.

### MAIN BODY

The interpretation of English idioms becomes more transparent when analyzed through the joint frameworks of embodied cognition and cultural models, both of which emphasize that language is not an autonomous system but a cognitive and sociocultural phenomenon. Cognitive linguistics rejects the idea that idioms are meaningless fixed phrases, instead, it argues that idiomatic meanings arise from conceptual metaphors, embodied experience, and cultural knowledge. By examining idioms through these principles, we can uncover the deep cognitive structures and cultural assumptions that underlie everyday English expressions.

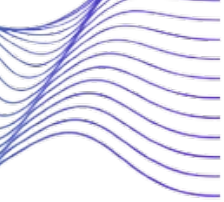
Embodied cognition insists that the human body serves as the primary foundation for conceptualization. Much of our abstract reasoning depends on sensorimotor experience, which becomes encoded in image schemas – recurring cognitive structures derived from bodily interactions with the environment. English idioms frequently reflect these image schemas, highlighting the pervasive influence of bodily experience on linguistic meaning.

For example, the UP–DOWN schema, rooted in our physical experience of verticality, plays a central role in idioms describing emotional and social states. Expressions such as “feel down,” “lift someone’s spirits,” and “climb the social ladder” rely on the metaphor GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN, which originates from the embodied association between upright posture and well-being. Similarly, the FORCE schema appears in idioms describing internal struggles or external pressures. Phrases like “fight temptation,” “push through difficulties,” or “be driven by ambition” conceptualize psychological processes in terms of physical force dynamics.

The CONTAINER schema, one of the most fundamental embodied structures, is also highly productive in English idioms. Human experience with in–out boundaries shapes conceptualizations of emotions, thoughts, and social relationships. Idioms such as “bottle up feelings,” “spill the beans,” and “be in trouble” demonstrate how mental states are understood through physical containment. These examples reveal that embodiment not only structures metaphor but also provides the cognitive basis from which idioms become meaningful.

While embodiment provides universal cognitive grounding, cultural models account for variations in how different communities conceptualize the world. Cultural models refer to shared, socially transmitted patterns of thinking that guide interpretation and behavior. Anglo-American cultural values – including individualism, time orientation, productivity, and self-regulation – are strongly reflected in English idioms.

A significant cultural model influencing English idioms is individualism, which prioritizes personal autonomy and self-reliance. Idioms such as “stand on your own two feet,” “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” and “mind your own business” convey the expectation that individuals should be independent and responsible for their own success. These expressions highlight a cultural preference for personal initiative over collective dependency.



Another deeply embedded cultural model concerns time discipline and the economic value of time. The metaphor TIME IS MONEY, emphasized by Lakoff and Johnson, is central to English-speaking societies and surfaces in idioms like “waste time,” “buy yourself some time,” or “save time.” Such expressions reflect a cultural belief that time is a limited, valuable resource to be managed efficiently, mirroring broader societal attitudes toward productivity and work ethic.

Emotional regulation is another prominent cultural dimension. Expressions such as “keep your cool,” “get a grip,” or “lose your temper” conceptualize emotions through control metaphors, indicating a cultural expectation that individuals maintain composure and assert control over emotional expression. This aligns with Western norms that value rationality and emotional restraint in social settings.

Although embodied experience and cultural models can be examined separately, their interaction is essential for fully understanding idiomatic meaning. Embodied structures provide the cognitive foundation for metaphorical mapping, while cultural models determine how these mappings are elaborated, valued, and interpreted within a particular community.

For instance, the idiom “go the extra mile” relies on the embodied experience of physical movement and exertion. However, its cultural meaning – valuing diligence, perseverance, and exceptional effort – arises from the Anglo-American work ethic. Likewise, “step out of your comfort zone” draws from embodied experience (spatial movement from a safe container), but its motivational cultural message reflects individualistic ideals of self-improvement and personal growth.

This interplay becomes especially significant for second-language learners who may understand the literal embodied metaphor but fail to grasp the cultural implications. Learners from collectivist cultures, for example, may find idioms emphasizing extreme individualism or self-promotion conceptually unfamiliar. Thus, understanding idioms requires both embodied cognition and culturally specific knowledge.

### **CONCLUSION**

The analysis of English idioms through the combined perspectives of embodied cognition and cultural models demonstrates that idiomatic meaning is shaped by both universal human experiences and culturally specific conceptualizations. Embodied cognition highlights that many idioms are grounded in physical interactions with the world – such as movement, balance, force, and containment – which form the cognitive structures underlying metaphorical thinking. These bodily-based patterns explain why idioms like “feel down,” “bottle up emotions,” or “push through challenges” resonate intuitively with speakers: their meanings arise from shared sensorimotor experiences that structure abstract reasoning.

However, embodiment alone cannot fully account for the cultural nuances embedded in idioms. Cultural models provide the sociocultural framework that guides how embodied metaphors are interpreted, valued, and extended within a particular community. English idioms reflect core Anglo-American cultural values such as individualism, personal responsibility, time efficiency, emotional control, and achievement orientation. Expressions like “stand on your own two feet,” “go the extra mile,” or “keep



your cool” illustrate how language encodes cultural expectations regarding independence, productivity, and self-regulation.

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