



The Use of Idiomatic Expressions in Presidential Speeches: A Cognitive Critical Contrastive Study of English and Arabic Speeches

Sameerah Atshan Al Fayyadh

University of Karbala / College of Education for the Humanities

Abstract in English

Presidential speeches serve as powerful tools for communication, persuasion, and national unity. So this study investigates idiomatic expressions in English and Arabic presidential speeches, and tries to answer the following questions: What are the reasons behind using idioms in the presidential speeches? What are the hidden ideologies? What are the differences between English and Arabic presidential speeches in the usage of idioms? The study aims at: Identifying reasons behind using idioms in the presidential speeches. Pinpointing hidden ideologies. Investigating differences between English and Arabic presidential speeches in the usage of idioms.

The following steps are followed; issuing a literature review, developing a framework of analysis, collecting data that is available on the internet. It is chosen purposefully to achieve the aims of the study.

It is concluded that: Arabic presidential speeches are more firm than English ones. In both English and Arabic presidential speeches, there are hidden ideologies. There are differences between the English and Arabic usage of Idiomatic expressions.

Paper Info

Keywords

Idiomatic expressions, ideology, conceptual metaphor, presidential speeches, category.

1. Introduction

Presidential speeches serve as powerful tools for communication, persuasion, and national unity. One of the rhetorical strategies commonly used by presidents is the incorporation of idiomatic expressions—phrases that carry figurative meanings beyond their

literal interpretation. These expressions enhance relatability, simplify complex issues, and add emotional depth to speeches.

This study investigates the presidential usage of idiomatic expressions, and tries to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the reasons behind using idioms in the presidential speeches?
- 2- What are the hidden ideologies?
- 3- What are the differences between English and Arabic presidential speeches in the usage of idioms?

2. The Aims of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following:

- 1- Identifying reasons behind using idioms in the presidential speeches.
- 2- Pinpointing hidden ideologies.
- 3- Investigating differences between English and Arabic presidential speeches in the usage of idioms.

3. The Hypotheses of the Study

It is hypothesized that:

- 1- The presidents use idioms for reasons like: simplification, motivation, and strength.
- 2- Idioms are used for hiding different ideologies.
- 3- English are different from Arabic speeches in a way that Arabic speeches are more plane.

4- The Limits of the Study

This study is limited to analyze (5) English Idioms, and (5) Arabic ones according to a critical cognitive framework of (Murdock, 1957), and (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Since idioms are difficult to be understood easily due to their metaphors and connotations that are embodied in them, this eclectic might be useful in the analysis of the selected data.

5- The Value of the Study

It is hoped that this study is valuable to those who are interested in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, Cognitive Linguistics, moreover, in the ideological considerations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions

Idioms are permanent expressions that enhance language by fusing figurative meaning with creative structural design. These idioms are interesting and difficult to understand since they frequently challenge literal clarification. "To bite off more than you can chew" For example, vividly conveys the concept of the idea of attempting to do something too difficult, which is not clear from its component phrases (ERKINOVICH, 2025, p.1). According to (Yusifova, 2013, p.133), idioms are defined as: expressions the elements of which cannot be reformed or replaced by other components. They are called stable expressions. However, some modifications are possible within idioms. These modifications may be both lexical and grammatical.

An Idiom is defined by (Ghazala, 2012); cited in Mohammed, 2025, p.820) as a fixed expression whose form is usually constant, and whose meaning is always the same, strict, metaphorical and indirect. Idioms are difficult to be understood simply due to their metaphor and connotations that are exemplified in them. This puts the weight on the audience to search their underlined significance not only the surface one (Mohammed, 2025, p.821). Usually, the meaning is different from the individual words, as in "To cost an arm and a leg" (ibid, p. 822). This idiom refers to something that is expensive.

2.2 The Usage of Idioms in the English Culture

According to (Murdock, 1957), idioms are used in the English culture in four axes. They are commonly used in 'cooking' as in: "On a plate" to get something easy without working for gaining it. "To cook the books" varying figures or a written record to cheat people mainly tax collectors. Second, they are

used in ‘marriage, and family occasions’ as in: “Tie the knot” “Shotgun wedding”, “Made in Heaven”, “Honeymoon phase”, “Cold Feet”. They are also used in sport as in: “The ball is in your court”, “Hit below the bill”. Finally, they are used in ‘Funeral rituals’ as in: “End- Passed Away”, “A dead silence”, “Over my dead body”.

In our case, idioms are used in the presidential speeches for certain reasons. They are either for simplification, or for ideological matters. The most famous presidents who had used idioms in their speeches are: John Kennedy, 1961 encouraging a new generation of leadership said: “Pass the touch”. Obama, just like other president has used idiomatic expressions in his speeches. He has said promoting empathy and understanding: “Walk a mile in their shoes”. While Donald Trump in his Camping Speech (2016) –advocating for political reform- has said: “Drain the swamp”. J. W. Bush the father, in the occupation of Iraq 1991 has said: “It was a piece of cake”.

From the examples above, it is shown that presidents mostly use idioms in their speeches.

2.3 The Role of Idiomatic Expressions in Presidential Speeches

Idiomatic expressions are tremendously embedded in a people’s culture and language. When presidents use them, they appeal to the common experiences and standards of their audience.

These expressions can serve several functions:

1. Simplifying Complex Ideas: Political concerns are often complicated and difficult for the general public to comprehend. Idioms assistance break

down these ideas into more accustomed terms. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt used the phrase “nothing to fear but fear itself” to address national concerns during the Great Depression, making the disaster seem less frightening (Lim, 2008).

2. Establishing a Connection with the Public: Idioms are often related with ordinary speech, making political leaders sound more relevant. Barack Obama, for instance, frequently used idioms like “get the ball rolling” to resound with citizens from various backgrounds (Charteris-Black, 2011).

3. Motivating Emotional Responses: Idiomatic language can arouse emotions, supporting key messages. In his speeches, Ronald Reagan often employed expressions like “a shining city on a hill” to inspire hopefulness and national pride. Such images can leave a permanent impression on the public.

4. Strengthening Messaging: Idioms can make slogans and policies used in the speeches more unforgettable. Donald Trump’s use of phrases like “drain the swamp” successfully conveyed his attitude on government corruption, while Bill Clinton’s “bridge to the 21st century” framed his vision for future progress.

5. Integration of Cultural Idioms: Leaders repeatedly incorporate idioms that mirror cultural values to reinforce their messages (Qalam Quest,2021).

6- Subtlety: In diplomatic contexts, leaders use idioms to communicate complex political standpoints (Al-Sharoufi, 2020).

2.4 The Idiomatic Characteristics

Idioms mostly have fixed features that rarely changed. These features are investigated in the following lines.

2.4.1 The Unity of Form and Meaning in Idioms

Unless any grammatical formula predicts of what a meaning entails, it means that the very grammar formula differs from the language rules which we create a sentence, and the one not agreeing to the grammar procedures turns to an extraordinary form. In this case it should be learned and examined as a whole structure. Existence of such structures is the main condition of the presence of groupings which are called idioms (Yusifova, 2013, p.133).

2.4.2 Syntactic Changes within Idioms

However, the analysis of separately-taken component parts of idioms is terrible, the grammar structures in them should be kept in observation. In many circumstances the syntactic description of idioms has been a subject of argument. Idioms are categorized by different linguists in different ways, for example, Chomsky (Chomsky, N., 1980) came up to the idioms as mixtures consisting of structures, containing rational units. As to Chomsky's thoughts some groupings having found their reflection in the human thought should be learned as additions entering the grammar consisting of certain elements and creations (Yusifova, 2013, p.134).

Fraser, (1970, p. 33, cited in Yusifova, 2013, p.135) has quantified that idioms between those which are able to go through all the grammatical modifications and those which are unable to go through the smallest grammar modifications at all. It should be marked that the growth of idioms, their wide usage is a speedy process. They are terminologies, not subjected to analysis, only some syntactic modifications may be carried out in them. The idioms which can effortlessly be subjected to syntactic

modifications are more flexible. The usage of different grammar tenses within the idioms, the practice of moods of the verb (active, passive voices), change of places of words, insertion of additional words or decrease of the words within the creations are the standards causing complications in the investigation of the idioms.

2.5 Idioms in English and Arabic: Similarities and Differences

Idiomatic expressions occur in different language fields. They are used in ads and daily life discourse. Idioms are identified as unforgotten colorful terminologies, influencing both listeners and readers. By means of idioms introduce the cultural circumstantial and traditions of the utterer or the author, they are considered as mood of the self-culture (Mohammed, 2025, p.820). Hence, the following lines will identify the idiomatic usage in English and Arabic cultures. That, surely, influence the presidential speeches.

1- It is said that idioms and phrases in English are crucial to people's daily conversation. In both written and spoken English, they are constantly mentioned.

2- English idioms mirror the English distinctive culture as geographical quotes or weather conditions: "Rome is not built in a single day".

2- Arabic idioms are expressions of culture that have been handed down from the beginning of time and are still utilized today by successive generations. As Arabic idioms reflect the uniqueness of the Arabic culture, "اليد الواحدة لا تصفق." Idomatic expressions are the key to cultural identities (Mohammed, 2025, pp.820-821).

3-Since the primary factor that determines idioms' universality

everywhere is what individuals do as humans when speaking languages, English and Arabic idioms are similar in that they share a common cultural characteristic. However, the distinctiveness of proverbs stems from cultural diversity, demonstrating that while each culture has its own unique topics, these themes are universal, resulting in comparable idiomatic phrases in different languages. See for example: “No smoke without fire”, “ لا دخان بلا نار ”

4-Idioms in Arabic and English are influenced by cultural backgrounds, with Arabic warning against illegal money gain and spending, while English idioms emphasize wise money spending and prioritizing individual benefits due to cultural differences: “A penny saved is a penny gained” , القرش الأبيض ينفع في اليوم , الأسود " الأسود"

All these factors are portrayed in the idiomatic usage in the presidential speeches. They are reflected in their speeches to convey persuasion, simplification, motivation as will be shown in section (3).

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Data Collection

The data under investigation is collected randomly, and purposefully to represent the study’s objectives. (10) idioms are chosen and analysed to reveal the hidden ideologies behind the presidential usage. They are available on the internet. They are quoted from presidential speeches as will be shown.

3.2 Theoretical and Practical Frameworks

An eclectic model of (Murdock, 1957), and (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) is used in the analysis of the selected data. Murdock has categorized idioms into four

types: sport: every action that needs effort and or muscles, cooking: is excluded as it is not found in the selected data, family and marriage: everything that refers to bonds, relations, and unity, and funeral: everything that refers to harm, pain, blood, victimization, etc. A fifth category is added by the researcher in order to achieve the study’s aims. It is sport and Family, since it represents both bonds, and efforts and strength. Note that this model is modified by the researcher to serve the aims of the study. On the other hand, Lakoff & Johnson have suggested the Conceptual Metaphor Theory/ Metaphorical Mapping or (CMT). Understanding how a source domain clarifies and translates a target domain, metaphorical mapping is so essential and important. There is a prearranged harmony between source domain and the target domain. Any Conceptual Metaphor uses abstract concepts with the target domain and concrete concepts with the source domain (Al- Fayadh, 2019, p. 87).

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 English Idioms

3.3.1.1 “Walk a mile in their shoes” by Barak Obama, in 2008.

1- **Category:** Sport.

2- **Hidden Ideology:** Encouraging empathy and understanding.

3- **Conceptual Mapping:**

Source	Target
Walking as a type of sport or relaxation	Over thinking and consideration

3.3.1.2 “Pass the Torch” by: John Kennedy, 1961.

1- Category: Sport.

2- Hidden Ideology: Encouraging a new generation of leadership.

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
Pass the stick or the flag that is common in sport competitions	Transferring leadership. This idiom serves the metaphor of transferring the guiding responsibility from one leader to another.

3.3.1.3 “A Shining City on a Hill” by: Ronal Regan, 1989.

1- Category: Family

2- Hidden Ideology: To symbolize American Expectations of being one entity.

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
The city is one family.	The unity of the city represents the unity of the whole American society.

3.3.1.4 “Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat”, by: Winston Churchil, May, 1940.

1- Category: Funeral.

2- Hidden Ideology: Praising efforts, and sacrifice during the war. He also laments martyrs.

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
Pain, suffering, sacrifice	Rallying the nation during the challenge

3.3.1.5 “The Lady is not for Turning” by: Margaret Thatcher, 1980.

1- Category: Family.

2- Hidden Ideology: Women’s unwillingness to change her policies.

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
Lady is decisive	Lady is uncontrollable

3.3.2 Arabic Idioms

3.3.2.1 “الوحدة قوة”/”Unity is Strength” by: Jalal Talabani, 2006.

1- Category: Family, and sport.

2- Hidden Ideology: being one hand to face political, and security challenges.

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
Family members support each other.	Enhance national solidarity.

3.3.2.2 “يد واحدة لا تصفق” “One hand does not clap,” by: Hosni Mubarak.

1- Category: Sport

2- Hidden Ideology: Importance of unity.

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
The end part of person's arm.	Helping each other, and being one hand.

3.3.2.3 نحن جميعاً في قارب واحد *All of us are in one boat* by: King Abdullah Bin Al-Hussien, 2011.

1- Category: Sport

2- Hidden Ideology: Confronting Challenges.

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
Having a trip in one ship	Help each other in solving problems.

3.3.2.4 وحدتنا مصدر قوتنا *United we stand, divided we fall* by: Shakh Tameem, 2022.

1- Category: Family and Sport.

2- Hidden Ideology: Solidarity and unity among Arabs

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
The ability to do or act something	One Arab Nation to confront crises.

3.3.2.5 ماكو خط/أحمر *There are no red lines.* by: Mohammad Shia Al-Sudani, 2023.

1- Category: Funeral

2- Hidden Ideology: No excuses for corruption

3- Conceptual Mapping:

Source	Target
Drawing a red lines for warning.	The Government will never ever forgive corrupt people.

Table (1) The Frequency and Percentages of Model Items in the Selected Data

No.	Item	English Speeches		Arabic Speeches	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1-	Sport	2	13.3%	2	13.3%
2-	Funeral	1	6.6%	1	6.6%
3-	Family	2	13.3%	0	0
4-	Hidden Ideology	5	33.3%	5	33.3%
5-	Conceptual Mapping	5	33.3%	5	33.3%
6-	Family and Sport	0	0	2	13.3%
7-	Total	15	100%	15	100%

Table (1) shows that Hidden Ideologies, and Conceptual Mapping in both English and Arabic texts have achieved the highest rate of occurrence (5 times) that equals (33.3%). This refers to the idea which all the politicians have certain ideologies in mind that are hidden behind idiomatic expressions. In both English and Arabic speeches, Sport is repeated (2 times), and has got (13.3%), Funeral has got (1time) of occurrence that is equal to (6.65). It is noted that Family is repeated (2 times) in English speeches that makes (13.3%), and it makes (0 time) of occurrence in the Arabic speeches.

Family and Sport has got the same times of occurrence in the Arabic speech and (0) in the English ones. That shows bonds, and relations in the English society are overcome by emotions, while in the Arabic society, they are a mixture of emotions, and strength.

5. Conclusion

The strategic use of idiomatic terminologies in presidential speeches increases their convincingness, emotional appeal, and relatability. These terminologies help shape national narratives, strengthen political ideologies, and raise a sense of unity among natives. Given their efficacy, idioms will likely continue a staple in political rhetoric for generations to come.

It is concluded that:

- 1- Arabic presidential speeches are firmer than English ones.
- 2- In both English and Arabic presidential speeches, there are hidden ideologies.
- 3- There are differences between the English and Arabic usage of Idiomatic expressions

6. References

-Al- Fayadh, S. (2019). A Contrastive Critical Discourse Analysis of Centre and Margin in

Selected English and Arabic Novels. (A Thesis). University of Babylon. Iraq.

- Al-Sharoufi, H. (2020). Equivalence in the translation of metaphors and idioms in King Abdullah II's political speeches. In International Journal of Arabic-English Studies, 20(1),

133-152. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372421817>.

-Chan, Y. & Marinelli, S. (2007). Definitions of Idioms in Preadolescents, Adolescents, and Adults. In Psycholinguistic Res (2008) 37: 1-20. DOI 10. 1007/s10936-007-9056-9.

-Charteris-Black, J. (2011). Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor. Palgrave Macmillan.

-Lakoff, G. (2004). Don't Think of an Elephant! Chelsea Green Publishing.

-Lim, E. T. (2008). The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from

George Washington to George W. Bush. Oxford University Press.

- Mohammed, J. M. (2025). Linguistic and cultural Barriers in Translating English Idioms into

Arabic. In Journal of Ecohumanism. Volume: 4, No: 2, pp. 820 – 837. ISSN: 2752-6798. (Print)

| ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)

<https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism>.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i2.6350>.

- Yusifova1, J. I. (2013). Syntactic Features of English Idioms. In International Journal of English Linguistics; Vol. 3, No. 3; 2013. ISSN 1923-869X E-ISSN 1923-8703. Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education.

Abstract in Arabic

استخدام التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في الخطابات الرئاسية: دراسة مقارنة معرفية نقدية للخطابات الإنجليزية والعربية

المستخلص: تعتبر الخطابات الرئاسية بمثابة أدوات قوية للتواصل والإقناع. لذا تبحث هذه الدراسة في التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في الخطابات الرئاسية باللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية، وتحاول الإجابة عن الأسئلة التالية: ما هي أسباب استخدام التعبيرات الاصطلاحية في الخطابات الرئاسية؟ ما هي الأيديولوجيات الخفية؟ ما هي الفروق بين الخطابات

الرئاسية الإنجليزية والعربية في استخدام التعابير الاصطلاحية؟ تهدف الدراسة إلى تحديد أسباب استخدام التعابير الاصطلاحية في الخطابات الرئاسية. تحديد الأيديولوجيات الخفية. استقصاء الفروق بين الخطابات الرئاسية الإنجليزية والعربية في استخدام التعابير الاصطلاحية. تم اتباع الخطوات التالية؛ إصدار مراجعة الأدبيات، وتطوير إطار عمل لتحليل النصوص المختارة. لقد جمعت العينات المتوفرة على الإنترنت بعد اختيارها بشكل يهدف لتحقيق أهداف الدراسة. لقد توصلت الدراسة إلى ما يلي الخطابات الرئاسية العربية أكثر وضوحاً من الخطابات الرئاسية الإنجليزية. في كل من الخطابات الرئاسية الإنجليزية والعربية هناك أيديولوجيات خفية. هناك اختلافات بين استخدام التعابير الاصطلاحية في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعبيرات الاصطلاحية؛ الأيديولوجيا؛ الاستعارة المفاهيمية؛ الخطابات الرئاسية؛ صنف
