DOI: 10.30816/ICONN5/2019/70

Multicultural aspects of idiomatic expressions and chrematonyms

Luminița Todea
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca,
North University Centre of Baia Mare, Romania

Abstract: Idioms have always aroused the curiosity of linguists and there is a long tradition in the study of idioms, especially within the field of lexicology. This research aims to illustrate and discuss the relevance of idiomatic expressions for English language learners and to investigate a selection of idioms and chrematonyms that include ethnonyms. While native speakers tend to use idiomatic expressions spontaneously without thinking of their figurative meaning, for non-native learners, idioms are somehow difficult to acquire. Accurate explanation of their meanings, their cultural and historical correlations as well as a constant exposure to idiomatic expressions and constant usage increase the language learners' communicative competence.
Keywords: ethnonyms, idiomatic expressions, chrematonyms, language learning.

Introduction

Learning a foreign language cannot be separated from learning about its culture, thus language and culture are inseparable. According to Kramsch (2000: 3), "Language embodies cultural reality…and language symbolizes cultural reality." In order to become a successful communicator across languages and cultures, one must gain a better understanding of people's norms of interaction and values from a cultural point of view as well. Thus, cultural awareness involves a "gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance, and facilitate international communication" (Tomlinson 2001: 5).

This paper aims to identify and examine the structure and meaning of the following ethnonyms *Dutch, English, French, Chinese, Indian* and *Turk* in idiomatic expressions and in chrematonyms (names of products) in the English language from a non-native language learner's perspective with an emphasis on their morphological structure. For the purpose of the given research, the corpus consists of a range of ethnonyms in idiomatic expression and chrematonyms to be found in online English monolingual dictionaries and English dictionaries of idioms.

Ethnonyms in English idiomatic expressions

Lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a foreign language and a lack of vocabulary knowledge is an obstacle to learning. Innovative usage of vocabulary by the speakers of a language, the success or failure of these innovations in achieving acceptance in the speech community, and the socially conditioned variation and change in their use are general processes of lexical dynamics which have counterparts in the borrowing and assimilation of words from other languages. Idiomatic expressions are influenced by extralinguistic factors such as certain social, historical, economic phenomena which are reflected in their lexical components and structure; therefore, certain pieces of information related to these aspects need to be decoded when being interpreted. They have an important stylistic and pragmatic function as they make the language more colourful and precise. Idioms are widely used in both spoken and written discourse and considered to be one of the hallmarks of native-like proficiency. One's language skills will increase rapidly if they can understand idioms in context and use them confidently and correctly. They might have connotations and pragmatic meanings which are not obvious at first, implying the user's attitude of admiration, approval, criticism, irony, disapproval, or humour. In Bortfield's opinion, idioms are defined as "fixed phrases that mean something other than what a literal interpretation of their individual words would indicate" (2003: 217); therefore, the sequence of words operate as a single semantic unit, and unlike many multi-word structures, the meaning of the whole cannot be deduced from an understanding of each constituent element being often grammatically restricted. Idioms are also defined as types of multi-word units that represent "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form, and in the case of idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. The speaker or writer cannot normally do any of the following with an idiom: change the order of the words in it; delete a word from it; add a word to it; replace a word with another; change its grammatical structure" (Baker 1992: 22).

A recurring focal point in changing views on idioms has been the question of their compositional status, a debate which weighs two alternatives as to how language users process idiomatic utterances: When people use idioms, do constituent elements contribute to the overall meaning, or are the overall meanings of idioms retrieved intact from the lexicon? McGlone, Glucksberg, and Cacciari (1994) assert that constituent words in an idiom take on phrase-specific meanings. They suggest that "the words that form familiar idioms, by repeated usage, come to incorporate at least part of the figurative sense that they have when embedded in idioms, a process aided by transparent conceptual relations between an idiom's constituents and that idiom's meaning" (1994: 182). Idioms offer a fascinating insight into cultures; consequently, by exploring them, people can better understand one other and build cultural bridges above ignorance, prejudice, or stereotypes. They are primary attributable to certain historical and cultural aspects of the corresponding nationalities. Language learners should be aware of certain drawbacks in understanding idioms, such as the intrinsic difficulties

that figurative language entails; insufficient exposure to or limited lexical proficiency of the language and poor knowledge of cultural and historical contexts.

Language names are probably mostly formed as mass nouns. The most familiar names of languages derive from adjectives and return to that status if they are combined with the categorizing term language. Therefore, "language names constitute a kind of proprio-appellative lemmas that behave primarily as proper names but that are construed as common nouns very frequently, much as in the way of trade names. The countable use of appellativized lemmas of language names is secondary to the uncountable use, as is also the case with lemmas of ordinary mass nouns" (Van Langendonck 2007: 244).

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, an ethnonym is defined as "a name used to refer to an ethnic group, tribe, or people" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*). Nationality adjectives used in idiomatic expressions become symbolic; they tend to carry metaphorical meanings that reflect the socio-cultural knowledge of a given community. They reflect the culture and history of the people speaking the language and they often require a thorough examination of the particular national background in order to comprehend their meanings, often shared between other cultures in a variety of expressions. The function of adjectives naming nationalities employed as constituents of idiomatic expressions is to highlight the ethnic identity of a given community implying both factual and cultural value. A particular characteristic of adjectives describing nationalities in the English language is the fact that they are capitalised even though they are not proper names.

Idiomatic expressions in the English language that include ethnonymic adjectives as *Dutch*, *French* or *Chinese* are based on the common historical background of these countries, their political heritage, shipping, and trading legacy. They are mostly used in informal, spoken English; while their origins are strongly associated with the cultural and historical ties countries and nationalities have with each other, as a consequence of the proximity of one country to another or of certain shared historical events. In some cases, when they are used in a humorous way, it is difficult to establish a clear distinction between humour and irony. They may also describe people in a critical way by exposing their real or supposed faults or lack of qualities.

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*, the term *Dutch* is an adjective when it is related to the Netherlands, its people, language, or culture. (*The) Dutch* as an uncountable noun refers to the people and the language used in the Netherlands and in some parts of Belgium. For example, *the Dutch* refers to the national group as a whole; whereas single examples are not formed in the same way: *A Dutchman/ woman*. *French* (adjective) is defined as relating to or describing a characteristic of France, its people, or their language. *French* as noun refers to *the French* (people); as an uncountable noun indicates the language used in France, and some other countries.

The idiom 'to go Dutch' means to share the cost of a meal in a restaurant, each person agreeing to pay their own share of the bill. The equivalent Romanian expression

might be 'a plăti nemțește' (my translation: to pay as the Germans do). A similar expression is the noun phrase 'Dutch treat' (ethnonymic noun+ countable noun) defined as a meal or other entertainment for which each person pays his or her own way. 'To be in Dutch', an old- fashioned expression used in American English, means being in trouble or disfavour with someone (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

The supposed great fondness of the Dutch for alcohol is reflected the following examples of idioms formed as ethnonymic noun phrases (pre-modifier+noun): 'Dutch agreement' is an agreement made while intoxicated; 'Dutch courage' refers to courage artificially stimulated especially by drink or drink taken for courage in order to boost one's confidence, 'Dutch feast' describes a social event known for the host getting drunk before the guests, 'Dutch headache' means hangover, or 'Dutch milk' is synonymous with beer (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

Considering the area of business, a 'Dutch sandwich' illustrates a way of avoiding tax used by some large corporations, which involves sending the company's income via a third country such as the Netherlands in order to further reduce the tax that has to be paid; a 'Dutch auction' highlights a public sale at which the price being asked for something is slowly reduced until someone will buy it; whereas a 'Dutch bargain' refers to an agreement for a sale in which one of the people gets an advantage over the other person (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

In terms of family relationships, English vocabulary displays quite a playful approach towards the word formation of noun phrases that are made up of the adjective *Dutch* and countable nouns denoting family members, such as: *uncle*, *wife, cousin*, *bride,* or *baby*; as a result, the noun phrases selected below are heavily invested with pejorative connotations. For instance, a 'Dutch uncle' is a person who admonishes sternly and bluntly; a 'Dutch wife' is a long pillow or a hot water bottle; 'Dutch cousins' implies close friends or two or more people whose only relation to each other is that they have slept with the same person; a 'Dutch bride' describes a high-class inflatable sex doll; a 'Dutch baby' is a type of pancake (https://dictionary.cambridge.org).

Nationality adjectives such as *Dutch* or *French* could be used as ethnonymic modifiers of certain noun phrases that infer sexually explicit aspects regarding an adventurous love life; e.g., a 'French letter': a slang term for condom; 'French postcards': naked pictures; a 'Dutch cap': a usually rubber or plastic contraceptive device in the form of a thimble-shaped molded cap that fits snugly over the uterine cervix and blocks sperm from entering the uterus (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

Considering medical terms for different illnesses, we may focus on names of diseases that are considered proper names being capitalized as well, and they are appositional structures including an ethnonymic component, as in the following examples: 'French disease': an old-fashioned name for syphilis; 'German measles' or rubella: an infectious disease that causes red spots on your body and can damage an unborn child; 'Dutch elm disease': a disease of elms caused by an ascomycetous fungus characterized by yellowing of the foliage, defoliation, and death (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

The challenges to decipher a message or comprehend a situation because of lack

of information or misunderstanding could be expressed by uttering one of the following idioms, structured from a morphological perspective as such:

a. noun phrases: an adjective+ a nationality related noun in: 'double Dutch' which means completely incomprehensible or hard to understand; or the ethnonymic adjective *Chinese* + countable noun; 'Chinese puzzle', that describes a situation that is complicated and difficult to understand; 'Chinese wall' suggests a method of preventing information from being shared, for example between people working for the same company but representing different interests; a set of actions that a business, especially a financial institution, takes in order to prevent information that one department has from reaching another department that might illegally get an advantage from it; 'Chinese whispers' which originally comes from a children's game in which a message is distorted by being passed around in a whisper is often used as a metaphor for mistakes and inaccurate information derived from gossip;

b. sentences that include the verb 'to be' in the Present Simple form, the 3rd person, singular, followed by an ethnonymic adjective as *Chinese* or *Greek* and other pre- or post- modifiers: for example: 'It's like Chinese arithmetic' which implies that something is complicated and hard to understand; 'It's all Greek to me' is used when people do not understand something that is written or said or do not have any knowledge on a topic. Its origin most likely comes from a similar phrase in Latin 'Graecum est; non legitur' (approx. translation 'It is Greek, therefore it cannot be read'). The context is related to the fact that during the Middle Ages, monks would write this phrase if they could not read Greek while copying manuscripts; therefore, it literally meant that the monks did not understand the Greek language (*Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* 2004).

Idiomatic expressions such as: 'Pardon my French', Excuse my French!' are used informally and humorously in communication to warn people that one is about to use swear words or inappropriate language; thus, their intention is to apologize for using offensive language. To take 'French leave': an informal, hasty, or secret departure (the Romanian equivalent expression 'to take English leave', similar to the French expression 'filer a' l'anglais'), was originated in the 18th century French custom of leaving a reception without saying good-bye to the host implying the absence or departure from some place or event without ceremony or permission (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

Furthermore, according to the present research, the number of idiomatic expressions in which the speaker's intention is to identify a location by including toponyms referring to geographical regions or countries (Holland, China, England) is rather reduced in comparison to the wider range of idioms including ethnonymic adjectives in English. The idiom 'the Dutch have taken Holland' meaning a statement of the obvious is used sarcastically upon the recounting of some stale news. People often use the terms Holland and the Netherlands interchangeably, but they do not match up exactly because the official name of the northwestern European founded in 1579 as a union of various provinces and cities is Kingdom of the Netherlands and one of these provinces was the province of Holland. The idiomatic expression 'not for all the tea in

China' means that no matter what happens, a person will not be persuaded to do something they do not want to. The idiom 'slow boat to China', used humorously, means on a course or trajectory that will take a very long amount of time, especially with the conclusion or destination being uncertain. A question such as 'What's that got to do with the price of tea in China?' is considered a rhetorical question calling attention to an irrelevant statement or suggestion made by another person. As a historical fact, China has been one of the world's largest tea producers. The expression 'to shut/close (one's) eyes and think of England' implies, in a broad sense, to endure any unpleasant or unwanted task or experience by thinking of one's duty or the benefits of the experience; whereas the idiomatic expression 'to talk for England' means to talk a lot, a talkative person (*Farlex Dictionary of Idioms* 2015). England indicates the geographical name of the country of southern Great Britain, a division of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The presence of collective terms designating the people of a nation, e.g., *Englishman, Dutchman, Chinaman, Turk, Indians* is to be illustrated in the next section. An idiomatic expression used in British English such as 'an Englishman's home is his castle' refers to the belief that people have the right to do what they want in their own home, and no one has the right to interfere in people's private lives (*Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* 2004). A humorous old-fashioned idiom such as 'I'm a Dutchman' might be uttered after describing or hearing something that is obviously not true (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* 2013). The idiomatic expression 'not a Chinaman's chance': absolutely no chance whatsoever, implies an offensive, inappropriate meaning. It referred to Chinese immigrants who came to California in the 1800s to help build railroads and they worked for extremely low wages, faced racism and higher taxation, and were prohibited from testifying in court for violence committed against them. 'A young Turk' is associated with a critical view considering one's behaviour, describing a young person who is rebellious and difficult to control in a company, team, or organisation; a person who is impatient to introduce changes or reform the system. The expression was first used to refer to a coalition of young dissidents consisting of college students and dissident soldiers who ended the sultanate of the Ottoman Empire in 1908. 'Too many chiefs and not enough Indians' is regarded as an offensive expression showing disapproval when criticizing an organization for having too many people in charge and not enough people to actually do the work.

Using ethnonyms in chrematonyms

According to the "ICOS List of Key Onomastic Terms" (2019), a chrematonym is "a name of a politico-economic or commercial or cultural institution or thing; a catch-all category."

"Human culture therefore creates names. […] How we are used to forming names and what it is we hope for with a name are questions connected to the surrounding society and culture through the language speaking community. The approval and establishment of names for common use always requires a community which has

a fairly similar vision of the surrounding world and, thus, the ability to understand the motivation and social function of the name" (Ainiala, Saarelma and Sjöblom 2012: 17). Certain types of 'foreignness' or nationality adjectives typically imply particular areas: English with food, tea; French with food, wine, clothing, hairstyling, sexuality, sophistication; Italian in the case of food, coffee and accessories or Chinese and Japanese with products with an intended air of exoticism. Chrematonyms that blend names of nationalities with names of products highlight the fact that "language and culture are better thought as a single unit: languaculture" (Tannen 2006: 343). Therefore, "names of products do not emerge in a natural way – they are artificially created by professionals" (Walkowiak 2013: 220); they are made up as noun phrases that include a premodifier (ethnonymic adjective) and a countable or uncountable noun. In Lavric's opinion, "the desired effect of country of origin is achieved when a name evokes a sense of a product having a higher quality because it is produced in a certain country" (Lavric 2012: 224).

The role of the ethnonymic adjective in these collocations is similar to the one of a brand name; it works as a label with multiple functions of the particular product: "it primarily informs the consumer about the main characteristics of the product he is buying; it encourages him to choose what best meets his needs; […] it is also a tool to attract the attention of the buyer (especially at the time of the first purchase). It then fulfills the fundamental function of making the product and the producer recognizable" (Cotticelli Kurras 2021: 32). Furthermore, the meaning of this human product "is provided by a set of specific cultural significances and quasi-established associated values which ensure its individuality, distinguishing it from similar products, and govern purchasing behaviours, according to preferential criteria" (Felecan 2016: 104).

Considering terminology related to food, a wide mix of nationalities have contributed to the naming of the respective chrematonyms as highlighted in the next section.

> *Danish blue* (cheese) refers to a strong-tasting white cheese with blue veins; *Swiss cheese*: a hard cheese characterized by elastic texture, mild nutlike flavor, and large holes that form during ripening; *French bread/ loaf*: a type of usually white bread in the form of a long, thin stick with a hard outer layer, generally known as baguette; *Italian bread*: a crusty, yeast-raised bread made without shortening and unsweetened, usually baked in long, thick loaves with tapered ends; *Danish loaf*: a large white loaf with a centre split having the top crust dusted with flour, especially one baked on the sole of the oven; *Danish pastries*: cakes made from sweet pastry that are often filled with apple or almond paste and usually topped with icing; *English muffins*: flat, round bread rolls that you split in half and usually eat hot with butter; *French pastry*: a rich pastry filled especially with custard or fruit; *Swiss roll*: a thin sheet of cake that is spread with jelly and rolled up; *Italian sandwich* or a *Cuban sandwich* is described as a large sandwich on a long-split roll with any of a variety of fillings, such as meatballs or cold cuts, cheese, lettuce, and tomato; *Turkish delight* is a soft type of sweet usually in the form of square pieces covered with powdered sugar (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*); *English breakfast*: a meal eaten in the morning consisting of cooked food such as fried eggs, tomatoes, baked

> beans, sausages and bacon; *French toast* refers to pieces of bread put into a mixture of egg and milk and then cooked in hot oil; *French fries*: long thin pieces of potato cooked in hot oil; synonym to *chips* in British English; *French dressing*: a mixture of oil and vinegar that is put on salads; *Italian dressing*: a strongly flavored vinaigrette for salads, containing garlic, oregano, red peppers; hollandaise sauce: a rich sauce of egg yolks, butter, vinegar, etc., served especially with fish (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*).

The global use of chrematonyms, composed of a premodifier as an ethnonymic adjective and a noun in describing furniture, decorations, buildings etc. has also been identified in the presence of the following human made products:

a. pieces of furniture and decorations: *Dutch doors* describe split or half doors that date back to the 17th century which are divided horizontally so that the top and bottom portion of the portal can be opened independently; *French doors* are defined as a pair of casement windows that reaches to the floor, opens in the middle, and is placed in an exterior wall; *French bed* is a bed without posts, terminating in identical outward-curving rolls at the head and the foot; *Welsh dresser* describes a piece of wooden furniture consisting of drawers and cupboards in the lower part and shelves on top; *Chinese lantern* is a decoration made from thin, folded, coloured paper with a light inside, a lantern made of brightly colored paper that can be folded up.

b. buildings and landscape: *Dutch barn* is a farm building with a curved roof on a frame that has no walls; *Turkish bath* (also hammam) defines a health treatment in which you sit in a room full of steam and are then massaged and washed, or a building in which this treatment is available; *Japanese garden* is a type of garden that has a simple, minimalist natural setting designed to inspire reflection and meditation (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

In terms of fashion and style, the nationality adjectives *French* or *Dutch* used as premodifiers in the following noun phrases structured as premodifier+ noun imply a particular feature of a certain fashion item, for instance: *French knickers*: baggy long-legged underwear of the Victorian era, which derived their name from the frilly underwear worn by Parisienne Can-Can dancers from the late 1800s to the early 1900s; *French roll*: a woman's hair style with the hair gathered at the back into a cylindrical roll; *French manicure*: American-style of manicure which makes use of light pink or nude polish on the nail and white polish on the tips; *Dutch bob*: a style of haircut with bangs and a straight, even bob that covers the ears (*Collins English Dictionary* 2002).

Conclusion

While native speakers tend to use idiomatic expressions spontaneously, for non-native speakers, their figurative meanings are somehow challenging to tackle. In order to learn them effectively, non-native learners should identify and choose idioms that are appropriate to the message they want to convey. In the case of the chrematonyms (names of things) under discussion, language learners do not face so many challenges in effective comprehension and spontaneous usage due to their global implications.

Therefore, cultural awareness plays a major role in understanding how figuratively intended concepts are lexicalized in a given language as a carrier of culture; thus, accurate explanations and constant exposure to idiomatic expressions and specific cultural and historical references must increase the language learners' level of communicative competence. Within the narrow compass of our analysis, the examples of English idioms and chrematonyms including ethnonyms selected in this paper can offer a glimpse of an abundance of ethnonymic expressions for fruitful investigation. It may seem reasonable to extend the research in the direction of other ethnonyms and the cognitive spheres that stand behind them.

References

Ainiala, T., M. Saarelma and P. Sjöblom. 2012. *Names in Focus: An Introduction to Finnish Onomastics.* Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

Baker, M. 1992. *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation.* London and New York: Routledge.

Bortfield, H. 2003. Comprehending Idioms Cross Linguistically. *Experimental Psychology* 50(3): 217–230.

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus. 2013. Cambridge University Press https://dictionary.cambridge.org (accessed in August 2019).

Collins English Dictionary. 2002. Harper Collins Publishers. https://www.collinsdictionary.com (accessed in August 2019).

Cotticelli Kurras, P. 2021. The Hidden Power of the Words. In *The Economy in Names. Values, Branding and Globalization.* Proceedings of Names in the Economy 6 International Conference, Uppsala, 3–5 June 2019, K. Leibring, L. Mattfolk, K. Neumüller, S. Nyström and E. Pihl (eds.), 25–38. Uppsala: Department of Archives and Research, Institute for Language and Folklore.

Farlex Dictionary of Idioms. 2015. https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com (accessed in August 2019).

Felecan, D. 2016. Defining Aspects and Taxonomy in the Case of Brand Names. *Rivista Italiana di Onomastica* XXII(1): 101–110.

ICOS List of Key Onomastic Terms. 2019. https://icosweb.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ICOS-Terms-en.pdf (accessed in August 2019).

Kramsch, C. J. 2000. *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lavric, E. 2012. Gastronomastics: Towards a Rhetoric of Dish Names on Restaurants' Menus. In *Onomastics Goes Business. Role and Relevance of Brand, Company and Other Names in Economic Contexts*, H. Wochele, J. Kuhn and M. Stegu (eds.), 219–232. Berlin: Logos.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online. https://www.ldoceonline.com (accessed in August 2019).

McGlone, M., S. Glucksberg and C. Cacciari. 1994. Semantic Productivity and Idiom Comprehension. *Discourse Processes* 17(2):167–190.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com (accessed in August 2019).

Oxford Dictionary of Idioms. 2004. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tannen, D. 2006. Language and Culture. In *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, R.W. Fasold and J.C. Linton (eds). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tomlinson, C. 2001. *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Van Langendonck, W. 2007. *Theory and Typology of Proper Names*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Walkowiak, J. B. 2013. Foreign Branding in Poland: Chrematonyms and Anthroponyms. In *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Onomastics "Name and Naming". Onomastics in Contemporary Public Space*, O. Felecan (ed.), 218–227. Cluj-Napoca: Mega, Argonaut.