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Semantic Analysis of English Idiomatic Expressions in Bilal's Film

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Abstract

Recent research indicates that idioms are one of the most complex elements in learning English, as their meanings are influenced by cultural differences, context, and limitations in the language being learned. By considering this fact, therefore, research investigated the use of idiomatic expressions in the film Bilal: A New Breed of Hero to identify their types and meanings, while underlining the importance of studying idioms in the context of English as a foreign language. This study applies a qualitative descriptive method with a discourse analysis approach, based on Fernando's classification of idioms into three categories: pure, semi-literal, and literal. Data in the form of film dialogues containing idioms were analyzed using semantic and narrative context studies. The findings showed that the majority of idioms fell into the semi-literal category, which are idioms that have two meanings, can be understood literally, but also contain figurative meanings. In addition to functioning as stylistic elements, idioms also strengthen characters, reflect conflicts, and reflect Arab-Islamic cultural values. The film Bilal: A New Breed of Hero is considered a worthy topic for research because it demonstrates the application of idioms in a real context while reflecting cultural values. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the development of semantic studies, expand language learning methods, and enhance cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: *Idioms Expression, Semantic Analysis, Bilal: A New Breed of Hero*

Introduction

Language was the primary tool for expressing ideas, feelings, and culture. In the modern era, English has become an international language that serves as a bridge between countries in the fields of education, politics, trade, and technology. Therefore, mastering English was no longer just an option but a necessity. However, one of the biggest challenges in learning it was idioms. Idioms were phrases whose meanings could not be understood directly from their individual words. For example, “*kick the bucket*” meant “*to die*,” not “*to kick a bucket*.” Understanding idioms required more than just language skills, but it also demanded a deep understanding of culture.

Idioms played an important role in communication because they enriched language with cultural, emotional, and expressive aspects. However, idioms were one of the most difficult elements to master. UNESCO (2021) stated that idioms and metaphors were the most challenging aspects of cultural literacy, especially for Asian students with different cultural backgrounds. The British Council (2020) also stated that most English teachers considered idioms to be the most difficult material to teach. Many students still relied on literal translations, which could lead to errors. Studies in Saudi Arabia (Alhaysony, 2017) and Indonesia (Budiawan, 2018) showed that students often faced challenges in understanding and translating idioms, and even online translation tools like Google Translate often provided incorrect meanings. These findings emphasized the importance of an idiom learning approach that focused on context and culture.

One method that could be used to understand idioms was through Fernando's (1996) classification, which grouped idioms according to the degree of their everyday meaning. This classification was referred to as a meaning-oriented spectrum of idiomaticity. First, there were pure idioms, which were expressions whose meanings were completely detached from the meanings of their constituent words. For one example, *spill the beans*

(to reveal a secret). Second, semi-literal idioms, which were idioms whose meaning could still be partially understood from their literal meaning, such as foot the bill (to cover the costs) or give someone a hand (to assist someone). Third, literal idioms, which were idioms whose meanings were still fairly clear, such as “lose track of time” (lose awareness of time) or “come to an end” (reach the end). This classification provided a clear structure for analyzing idioms and made it easier for language learners to understand.

Films can be used as an effective medium for applying this classification in a real-world context. Films presented language in a real-world context with the addition of cultural and visual expressions. Majuddin et al (2021), mentioned that audiovisual media such as films could help students understand compound expressions, including idioms, because they were accompanied by real situations that reinforce the meaning of these expressions. One film that was worth analyzing is the story of Bilal bin Rabah, the first muezzin in the history of Islam, untitled Bilal: A New Breed of Hero. This film is in English but rich in Arab-Islamic cultural values, presenting many idiomatic expressions that are interesting to analyze. In addition to its cultural value, Bilal: *A New Breed of Hero* has also gained international recognition through screenings at various global film festivals and is appreciated for its universal message of justice and freedom. The use of English dialogue accompanied by inspiring moral messages makes this film very important as an educational reference in language learning and cultural studies. With this in mind, this study focused on analyzing idioms in the film with two main objectives: (1) to classify the idioms in the film according to Fernando's (1996) framework, namely pure idioms, semi-literal idioms, and literal idioms; and (2) to interpret the meaning of these idioms in their cultural and narrative contexts. The research findings were expected to enrich semantic studies, support English language learning methods, and expand cross-cultural understanding through film.

Method

This study applied a descriptive qualitative method through discourse analysis to examine idiomatic expressions in the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* (2015) by Ayman Jamal. Data was obtained through repeated viewings of the film, confirmed dialogue transcriptions, and the identification of idioms, which were then classified according to Fernando's (1996) categories: pure idioms, semi-idioms, and literal idioms. To check the accuracy of the interpretation, the analysis used official dictionaries like Cambridge and Farlex. These references helped clarify the literal and figurative meanings of idioms in relation to the storyline and interactions between characters. The data analysis process was carried out through several systematic steps:

1. Reading and taking notes on the transcripts to identify idioms.
2. Grouping idioms into Fernando's categories (PI, SI, LI).
3. Interpreting idioms by analyzing their literal and figurative meanings based on context, character interactions, tone of voice, and body language.
4. Comparing definitions with linguistic sources (Liu, 2008; Cruse, 2011) and idiom dictionaries.
5. Provided data coding that included serial numbers, time of appearance, and idiom categories. For example, the expression “No chains will hold you” was coded as “01/18.03/SI”. The number “01” reflects the data serial number, “18.03” indicated the time the idiom appeared at 18 minutes and 3 seconds, and “SI” represented the Semi Idiom category.

In addition, to confirm the reliability of the semantic analysis, which may be subjective, this study uses the data validity criteria proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985). Credibility was maintained through triangulation, which included discussions, visual elements, and a theoretical basis. Meanwhile, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are enhanced through detailed explanations and clear analysis procedures. The reliability

of the analysis results was further improved by comparing the meanings of idioms through various official idiomatic dictionaries (Cambridge Dictionary of Idioms, Collins Dictionary of Idiom, American Heritage Dictionary, and The Farlex Dictionary of Idioms). Then linguistic theories, as well as by including the context of the film dialogue to minimize the possibility of bias.

However, analyzing idioms presented its own challenges, especially when idioms had both literal and figurative meanings or when the nuances of Arab-Islamic culture were difficult to translate (Saeed, 2009). These challenges were overcome by referring to various sources and carefully verifying the context. The combination of qualitative, semantic, and discourse approaches made this analysis organized, reliable, and important in understanding idiomatic expressions in films. However, the use of a single film as a data source is still considered a limitation, although it does not diminish the relevance of the results for exploring idioms in cinematic discourse.

Findings

This study identified 14 idioms as part of idiomatic expressions in English, which were then classified based on Fernando's theory (1996) into three categories, namely pure idioms, semi-literal idioms, and literal idioms. Through qualitative methods and discourse analysis, researchers explored the semantic meaning of idioms, as well as the cultural values seen in the dialogue of the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero*. Based on the analysis, semi-literal idioms appeared most frequently (6 datum), followed by literal idioms (4 datum) and pure idioms (4 datum). Each category would be presented with representative examples in the following section.

Table 1. Examples of Idiomatic Expressions in the Film

Datum 9: (09/49.16/PI)	Pure idiom	Ummaya: “A toast to my son, Safwan. He had the business sense to make a killing on those little idols.”	The expression represented quick and large profits, reflecting greed, materialism, and exploitation, with “killing” intensifying the violent undertone of immoral wealth.
Datum 8: (08/39.14/SI)	Semi-Literal Idiom	Ummaya: “Bilal. Come, sing for us. Let's lighten the mood. ”	The expression is related to stress reduction, often through diversion or influence. Umayya used it to manipulate situations and showed how language could hide true intentions.
Datum 4: (04/18.26/LI)	Literal Idiom	Safwan: “No matter what you do, a master breeds a master, and a slave breeds a slave ”	The catchword implied that social status cannot be changed, normalized oppression, and justifies inequality, while contradicting Islamic principles of justice and equality.

This study identified 14 idioms in *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* that had figurative meanings and also contained cultural and moral values. The most dominant were semi-literal idioms, followed by literal idioms and pure idioms, with different functions in describing power, manipulation, social injustice, and moral messages. Fernando's (1996) classification helped describe the differences in meaning applied by the characters. Furthermore, the distribution of idioms for each character is presented in the diagram below.

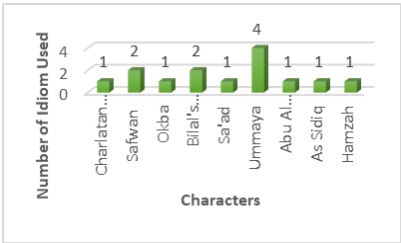


Figure 1.

Frequency of Idiom usage by Character

According to the bar chart above, the use of idioms in the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* varied for each character. Umayya was the character who used idioms the most, four times, followed by Safwan and Bilal's mother, who each used two idioms. On the other hand, characters such as Charlatan, Okba, Sa'ad, Abu Al Hakam, As Sidiq, and Hamzah only use one expression. This distribution showed that the use of idioms was not evenly distributed among all characters, but depended on their roles and level of involvement in the narrative. Therefore, idioms not only served as linguistic expressions, but also as tools to emphasize character, convey feelings, and reflect the social status of the characters. After examining this distribution, the study then looked at the categories of idioms, namely pure idioms, semi-literal idioms, and literal idioms, as shown in the following diagram.

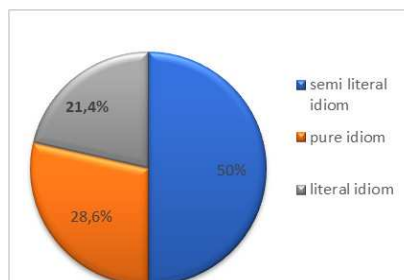


Figure 2.

Frequency of Idiom Calcification in the Film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero*

The diagram above shows that the most dominant idioms in the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* were semi-literal idioms (50%), followed by pure idioms (28.6%) and literal idioms (21.4%). The dominance of semi-literal idioms reflected the screenwriter's tendency to choose phrases that remained connected to their literal meanings, making them easily understandable to a diverse global audience while maintaining the expressive power of the language. The presence of pure idiomatic expressions accounted for nearly a third of all idioms, adding emotional, dramatic, and cultural dimensions,

particularly during pivotal moments filled with moral conflict. On the other hand, despite their small number, literal idioms still provided variation in character expression. Therefore, the distribution of these idioms not only offered linguistic diversity but also served as a communication strategy that united literal, figurative, and semi-figurative meanings to create a profound narrative, convey cultural values, and ensure cross-cultural accessibility of meaning.

Discussion

Idiomatic expressions in the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* served not only as linguistic embellishments but also as pragmatic, emotional, and moral tools that shaped the storyline. Expressions such as “*stop talking in riddles!*” demonstrated power through assertive speech, while “*a sword and horse cannot make you a great man*” served as an ethical metaphor that placed integrity above physical strength. Other expressions, such as “*teach this rat a lesson*” or “*welcome with open arms,*” demonstrated emotional dominance as well as social solidarity. This function aligned with Hartati et al, (2024), who emphasized the importance of idioms in strengthening characters in the film *Avatar: The Way of Water*, as well as Prochnow et al, (2024), who showed that idioms could express a range of emotions, from anger to empathy, making them a vital tool in interpersonal communication strategies. Therefore, idioms not only built interactions between characters but also provided opportunities for deeper philosophical and cultural interpretations.

These philosophical and cultural aspects were evident in expressions that reflected universal Arab-Islamic values. For example, the idiom *no chains will hold you* was not only interpreted literally, but also symbolized the rejection of oppression and reflected the philosophy of freedom in Islam (Wulandari & Rusmana, 2022). Similarly, the idiom “*a sword and*

horse cannot make you a great man” rejected the argument that honor was measured by physical attributes, but rather by wisdom and moral values, as discussed by Putri (2022). This finding was consistent with Goshkheteliani (2019), who stated that idioms reflected universal cultural values but were still influenced by local contexts. In this way, idioms in the film Bilal served as narrative connectors that integrated Islamic moral messages with universal human values.

The connection between ethical functions and aspects of power has become increasingly clear when idioms were applied to show the dominance of certain characters. In this film, Ummaya's mastery of idioms reflected her position as an antagonist who was symbolically and ideologically powerful. Idioms served not only as linguistic decoration but also as a communication strategy to regulate meaning, create reality, and assert her superiority. In line with Van Dijk's (1998) view, language was seen as an ideological instrument that created and reproduced power structures, making Ummaya's expressions a medium for maintaining social dominance. Additionally, Kecskes (2014) emphasized that idioms were often used by those of high status to convey meaning in a subtle yet efficient manner, allowing Ummaya to conceal threats or manipulation without diminishing her authority. The presence of idioms also enhanced her intellectual image, as, according to Semino & Demjén (2017), the use of idioms and metaphors served to demonstrate cognitive control and high linguistic ability, making Ummaya not only physically strong but also strong in a discursive context. Furthermore, Ervas & Gola (2016) highlighted the argumentative role of idioms in indirectly shaping the audience's perspective, so that Ummaya's idioms functioned as a means to influence thoughts and reinforce responses to her cleverness and superiority. Thus, the idioms in Ummaya's speech are not merely linguistic expressions but symbols of power, ideological dominance, and intellectual acuity within the film's narrative structure.

In line with this, the form of idioms also showed an important communication strategy. In the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero*, almost half of the idioms were semi-literal, indicating that the film combined figurative nuances with literal aspects to strengthen the historical atmosphere while making it easier for the audience to understand the conversations. This was in line with the findings of Nurfitriani's (2022) research, which emphasized the strong Arab and Islamic cultural nuances in the film, as well as Sofyani's (2021) study, which revealed that semi-literal idioms were often used in audiovisual media because they could maintain figurative value while remaining easily understood by the general audience. For example, in the expression “no chains will hold you,” the core meaning was immediately conveyed, yet it still produced an emotional and symbolic impact. The dominance of semi-literal expressions demonstrated the film's creative strategy in effectively conveying moral and emotional messages to an international audience without diminishing the cultural values it highlighted.

In not only its form, but also its frequency of use, idioms also reflected the crucial role of each character in the story. Ummaya, as the central antagonist, used the most idioms, which emphasized her power, authority, and role in creating ideological conflict. Safwan used idioms less frequently, but his role reinforced the social structure and normalized oppression, in line with the values he inherited from his father. On the other hand, characters such as Bilal, his mother, and Hamzah use idioms less frequently but with moral and religious values that provide a counter-narrative to Ummaya's influence. This distribution was used to show that the frequency of idioms is not only related to numbers but also acts as a marker of narrative position: the more often a character uses idioms, the stronger their symbolic and ideological presence in the narrative.

Overall, the use of idioms in the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* not

only served as an aesthetic element, but also as a means of communication that linked emotional, moral, cultural, and ideological aspects. Moreover, the distribution of idioms among the characters revealed the dynamics of power hidden within the storyline. For example, Umayya's frequent utilization of idioms emphasized his power and showed his position as an influential figure, while characters such as Sa'ad used idioms less frequently to convey moral values and emotional strength. This imbalance allowed the audience to understand who controlled the discourse and how resistance or surrender was expressed. In this way, idioms served not only as narrative connectors to convey universal human values derived from Arab-Islamic culture, but also reinforced the audience's understanding of hierarchy, struggle, and ideological conflict, while enriching the artistic and philosophical dimensions of the film.

Conclusion

This study explores idiomatic expressions in the film *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* with an emphasis on the categories of idioms based on classification as well as their semantic meanings. Based on the analysis, 14 idioms were identified, which were grouped into three categories: 5 pure idioms, 6 semi-idioms, and 3 literal idioms. The terms are used by various characters in meaningful contexts, reflecting deep cultural, spiritual, and social values. The meanings of the idioms are semantically evaluated based on cultural, linguistic, and visual contexts. The film not only serves as an authentic source for learning idioms but also conveys moral values related to struggle, freedom, and justice. The study also shows that the utilization of films in idiom learning is very beneficial as it provides meaning in a contextual and visual form, which can be used as a tool for idiom learning.

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