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IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN ALGIERS: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY

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Abstract:

This article explores the subject of idiomatic expressions, a significant form of communication within society due to their widespread usage and frequent presence in everyday speech. These expressions have garnered considerable attention from researchers and authors across various disciplines, including literary studies, stylistics, translation, lexicography, and linguistics. They are recognized as one of the most important linguistic phenomena in all natural languages, distinguished by unique features that intersect with all aspects of linguistic study - phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In Algerian speech, idiomatic expressions are prevalent in greetings, receptions, and congratulations. This study aims to elucidate the characteristics, significance, and role of idiomatic expressions in communicative discourse.

Keywords:

idiomatic expressions, linguistic phenomenon, dialects, colloquial language, lexical units, common structures, recurrent structures.

Introduction:

The Arabic language, being the language of the Qur'an and eloquence, offers diverse and unlimited means of communication, including poetry, oratory, letters, and more. This diversity allows the recipient of the speech to comprehend and enjoy it fully, especially considering the era of eloquence which reached an unparalleled peak. However, the level of the language declined after that period. It is well-known that the language has dialects that expanded with the geographical spread and Islamic conquests. These dialects persist to this day, with a single country often hosting several dialects differing by region and living conditions.

In Algeria, for instance, the northern dialect is distinct from the southern one, and the eastern dialect differs from the western one. These dialects are often very close to the classical language and exhibit various forms of expression such as proverbs, sayings, riddles, and puzzles. These fall under the phenomenon of idiomatic expressions or fixed expressions, which is the subject of this study due to their importance as a significant form of social communication, given their prevalence and common usage. Most Algerian speech includes these expressions in greetings, congratulations, and daily conversations, such as "Take what God has given you," (خوذ) "With all my heart," (ماعطاك الله) "Our visit is a blessing," (زارتنا بركة) and "It's measurement talk," (الحديث قياس) among others. These phrases are deeply ingrained in everyday language.

The study raises several questions, including:

- What is the importance of idiomatic expressions and their role in communicative discourse?
- What is meant by idiomatic expressions? Are they ancient or modern phenomena?

- What are the characteristics of these expressions?

The Concept of Idiomatic Expressions:

Idiomatic expressions are a common phenomenon across world languages and an important means of expression. They are an integral part of linguistic eloquence and clarity, embodying the beliefs of a community, its perception of existence, social relationships, culture, and human and life experiences. They are a social product par excellence, preserving the linguistic heritage of peoples, their principles in life, and articulating their needs and states, including customs, traditions, religious ceremonies, and popular practices, as well as environmental features. These expressions encapsulate the profound experiences of nations, including their suffering, happiness, anger, and satisfaction (Ghanmi, 2019).

They represent a deep aspect of people's lives and cannot be isolated from their origins and sources, as they reflect realities in all environments. Language and these expressions enable us to understand the living conditions of any area, whether easy or difficult, and the challenges faced by its inhabitants in meeting their needs.

One of the characteristics of these expressions is that they are not limited to a specific group but encompass all segments of society. They are not exclusive to any particular class but are used by both the general public and the elite. They appear in literary and poetic texts, journalistic writings, daily newspapers, interviews, and religious sermons, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Politicians also use them in their speeches and campaigns due to their communicative and persuasive power.

These expressions are present in all types of texts, spoken and written. They are known as linguistic sequences consisting of more than one element, where each phrase comprises at least two words habitually used together and frequently occurring, forming a semantic unit (Ghanmi, 2019).

Arabic researchers and authors have shown significant interest in these expressions across various literary, stylistic, translation, and lexicographical studies. Definitions vary among researchers, with no single agreed-upon concept. Ahmad Mukhtar Omar defines them as "phrases whose overall meaning is not understood merely by comprehending the meanings of their individual words and combining these meanings" (Omar, 2007).

Mamdouh Fikri Hijazi, a member of the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo, refers to idiomatic expressions as "fixed structures," defining them as consisting of more than one word with a specific syntactic and semantic relationship. He explains that these expressions originally appeared in a specific linguistic form to convey a particular meaning, and then were adopted by speakers and writers without altering their original format (Hijazi, n.d.).

Another perspective considers idiomatic expressions as "adhesive models" used and circulated as inseparable units, which must retain a fixed form and are not subject to modification in speech or writing. Any alteration—whether through reordering, substituting, or adding elements—can disrupt their meaning. The relationship between the components of these expressions is therefore constrained rather than free, leading some linguists to describe them as "frozen phrases," "syntactically fixed expressions," or "fixed units" (Unités phraséologiques). These units are treated similarly to lexical units (unité lexicale), as their overall meaning cannot be deduced simply by understanding the meanings of their individual components and combining them.

The components of a specific expression lose their individual meanings when isolated, tending to be idiomatic both syntactically and semantically. This means their meaning cannot be predicted from the syntactic and semantic properties of their components. Instead, they acquire an overall meaning, often quite different from the sum of their literal meanings. As these expressions become familiar through frequent use, they evolve into established linguistic units within the language system, influencing their inclusion in dictionaries (Ghanmi, 2019).

These idiomatic expressions are resistant to change, as they are characterized by their fixedness. They consist of two or more words, and altering, removing, or omitting any element can lead to loss of meaning and disrupt their elegance, rhyme, and rhetorical effect. For instance, the phrases "the situation turned upside down" (انقلبت الأمور) or "the confusion between right and wrong" (اختلط الحابل بالنابل) are fixed expressions. Changing them to "the situation turned on its head" or "the confusion between right" would diminish their stylistic and semantic value.

Characteristics of Idiomatic Expressions:

Idiomatic expressions are one of the most significant linguistic phenomena across all natural languages due to their distinct characteristics related to all components of linguistic study, including phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and usage. These characteristics help define the specific nature of the concept represented by the expression and distinguish it from neighboring concepts that share some semantic features.

These expressions are considered "collocations" because their words are inseparably linked and are described as idiomatic because they remain fixed in form, circulated among users without alteration. They have become a lexical item that dictionary compilers must include. Semantically, idiomatic expressions may contain metaphors, similes, or euphemisms within a single structure. If the components of these collocations are separated, the figurative meaning disappears.

We will now address these characteristics and examine each one individually:

1) Prevalence

Idiomatic expressions are lexical units that have become entrenched in a language system through frequent use and transmission across generations for a long period. Such expressions can be traced back to the pre-Islamic era in Arabic and were further reinforced with the revelation of the Quran, which contains many examples of these expressive forms in various styles. These expressions were also present in the speeches of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), showcasing their expressive power and impact on listeners. Ibn Abd Rabboh remarked: "They are the adornment of speech, the essence of words, and the embellishment of meanings. The Arabs selected them, and the non-Arabs adopted them, used in every era and by every tongue. They are more enduring than poetry and brighter than oratory, moving with ease and universality" (Ibn Abd Rabboh, n.d.). This indicates their long-standing presence and continuous relevance in creative texts, both poetry and prose, extending into the present day.

2) Conciseness

Idiomatic expressions are characterized by brevity and succinctness in their structure. They convey their intended meaning through concise language that serves the purpose efficiently. This brevity facilitates their acceptance, memorization, and usage, especially given their aesthetic appeal and adherence to rhetorical devices such as alliteration, rhyme, antithesis, and rhythmic patterns. For example: "He was silent for a thousand words but spoke badly in one" means that someone remained silent about many things but made a poor statement in a single instance; "He who warns is excused," "During exams, a person is either honored or humiliated," and "A man's enemy is his folly, and his friend is his wisdom." (Journal of Madarat in Language and Literature, 2019).

Fixed expressions are typically concise and avoid unnecessary repetition, which makes them less burdensome for both the speaker and the listener. This is common across languages, but in Arabic, there is a greater tendency towards conciseness and simplicity. Despite their short form, these expressions are rich in meaning, encapsulating extensive information about events, experiences, and Arabic cultural heritage. Thus, they represent an economy of words while maintaining open and broad meanings.

The more succinct the expression, the broader its implications and meanings. For instance, analyzing and reconstructing an idiomatic expression often reveals multiple layers of meaning beyond the literal words used. ." (Journal of Madarat in Language and Literature, 2019).

3) Structure and Rigidity

A defining characteristic of idiomatic expressions is their composition of two or more words, which fall within the categories of nouns, verbs, and prepositions. These expressions require a specific arrangement, without deletion, addition, or alteration of elements. Therefore, they are fixed in their form. Any alteration or separation of components will disconnect the expression from its intended meaning and obscure the purpose from the listener or recipient. For instance, "to give the green light" means to permit or authorize something. The verb "give"

combined with the adjectival phrase "the green light" expresses permission and allowance for an action. If separated from the verb or isolated, the expression would convey a new meaning related to giving or presenting something, losing the original sense of permission and authorization. Thus, it is impossible to discuss idiomatic expressions with isolated components because their elements are sounds forming words. Any change introduces a degree of strangeness for the listener, given the established phonological image in their mind. This stability is maintained at both semantic and syntactic levels, unlike free expressions that can be transformed into various forms.

Therefore, any alteration to a component of these expressions disrupts their original meaning, diminishing their originality, uniqueness, rhetorical style, historical value, and expressive power.

For example, the expression "The summer wasted the milk" (الصيف ضيعت اللبن) refers to squandering available opportunities. It is used in limited contexts, and its application is restricted by specific rules of usage, such as the unchangeability of pronouns and tenses. It is not correct to say "The summer wasted your milk" or "The summer wasted their milk." Originally intended for a feminine subject, it has not been altered to accommodate different grammatical contexts. Despite addressing a masculine or plural subject, the original feminine form remains unchanged.

Thus, it can be concluded that while free expressions allow for syntactic adjustments, lexical substitutions, and inflections, idiomatic expressions adhere to a fixed and stable semantic form.

4) Holistic Meaning

These expressions represent cohesive semantic units, starting from two or more words, where all words function as a single semantic unit. They are characterized by their unity in structure and the non-analytical nature of their component parts according to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations within the Arabic language system. This means that their meaning is not derived from the meanings of their individual components or from grammatical relationships among them. Instead, they convey a holistic, indivisible meaning that often deviates significantly from the literal meanings of their components, embodying a feature of Arabic rhetoric.

For example, the phrase "So-and-so is a guardian of Adam" "فلان وصي آدم" refers to a person who is excessively nosy, intruding into matters that do not concern them. This expression does not derive its meaning from the individual words ("guardian" + "Adam") or their syntactic relations, but rather from the conventional and agreed-upon meaning within the Arabic-speaking community.

Other examples include "They came all together" "جاؤوا عن بكرة أبيهم" meaning everyone, "So-and-so is steadfast" "فلان رابط الجأش" meaning brave, "He let his legs loose" "أطلق ساقيه للريح" meaning he ran quickly, and "So-and-so is a chatterbox" "فلان اجتماع يمشي" meaning talkative.

These expressions illustrate that such linguistic forms are cohesive semantic units, similar to a unified whole or a single structure, not separable, and whose meaning is non-compositional. They represent familiar collective representations that become entrenched in the minds of members of a linguistic community, forming a habitual part of their speech (Journal of Madarat in Language and Literature, 2019).

Humans are bound by the customs and traditions of their society, making it difficult for them to deviate from these norms. Communication can often be encoded in various ways, including through the use of proverbs and riddles. Consequently, if a speaker or individual strays from their cultural norms, they may find themselves distanced from understanding the intended meaning, leading to confusion and ambiguity.

5) Opacity of Meaning

What distinguishes these idiomatic expressions is their alignment with rhetorical features, which include similes, metaphors, and stylistic devices such as alliteration and figurative language. These elements enhance the sweetness and precision of meaning, making it more comprehensible to the listener. Idiomatic expressions are characterized by their rhetorical finesse and elaborate imagery, relying more on allusion and indirectness than on straightforward clarification. They convey a figurative meaning that transcends the literal meanings of their components and is established through convention and usage within the linguistic community. This figurative meaning becomes entrenched and widespread through repeated use, eventually becoming a fixed and familiar part of the language.

Metaphorical usage (such as allusion, indirectness, simile, and metaphor) is prevalent in Arabic speech and has been extensively described and analyzed in classical and modern grammatical and rhetorical works. Thus, idiomatic expressions do not directly state their meanings nor can their significance be inferred solely from the meanings of their individual components. Instead, they present meaning and nuance in a refined and elegant manner, making them more impactful and expressive compared to free structures due to their significant rhetorical and expressive power.

For example, the phrase "The death of a man is between his jaws" "مقتل الرجل بين فكّيه" serves as a warning about the severe consequences of verbal missteps. The literal meanings of the words do not reveal the severe consequences of verbal errors; the semantic relationship here is opaque. The recipient understands this meaning based on their linguistic competence and shared cultural knowledge, which reflects common agreements and traditions within their community (Journal of Madarat in Language and Literature, 2019).

Due to the metaphorical nature of idiomatic expressions, they often pose significant challenges in translation. The literal meaning carried by an idiomatic expression raises doubts about the translator's ability to convey the original meaning accurately. Consequently, idiomatic expressions are regarded as a substantial challenge to the translator's skill (Abu Al-Saida, 2023: 202).

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that idiomatic expressions, or fixed expressions, are an integral part of linguistic activity due to their distinctiveness and characteristics as previously mentioned. These expressions differ fundamentally from free expressions in their deep and elegant presentation of meaning, which is appreciated by the listener. They also serve as a repository of cultural heritage. Scholars and analysts can examine them from various perspectives and fields, including pragmatic, psychological, and social studies.

This research focuses on the most commonly used idiomatic expressions in Algiers, such as those used for congratulations and greetings, among others. We have applied rhetorical analysis to these expressions to explore their rhetorical qualities, elegance, and precision, as well as to identify key stylistic devices present within them.

Examples of Idiomatic Expressions used in Algiers

- "الله غالب" ("*Allah ghalib*")

This expression, meaning "God is powerful" or "God is in control," is frequently used to convey a sense of resignation or helplessness. It often reflects a feeling of inevitability or regret about circumstances beyond one's control.

- "قلبو بارد" ("*Qalbo bard*")

Literally translating to "his heart is cold," this expression describes someone who is indifferent or emotionally detached. It can also be interpreted as someone who is numb to the feelings of others.

- "أرقد مهني" ("*Arqad mahni*")

Translating to "rest easy" or "sleep peacefully," this phrase is used to reassure someone, indicating that they need not worry. It conveys a sense of comfort and optimism about the situation.

- "حاكم سابعو" ("*Hakem sab'o*")

Literally meaning "he rules his own world," this expression describes someone who stays away from social interactions and local issues, focusing solely on their own affairs. It implies a person who is isolated and does not interfere in matters outside their personal concerns.

- "كلامو دوا" ("*Klamo dawa*")

Translating to "his words are medicine," this idiom is used to describe someone whose speech is soothing and wise. Such a person is often respected in their community for their ability to resolve issues with calm and effective communication.

- "عطي الريح لرجليك" ("*Aṭṭi ar-riḥ li-rijlayk*")

This phrase, which translates to "give the wind to your legs," is used to express anger or irritation towards someone, often implying that they should leave quickly. It is a figurative way of telling someone to go away as soon as possible.

- "قلبو بيض" ("*Qalbo byed*")

Literally meaning "his heart is white," this idiom is used to describe someone who is forgiving and kind-hearted, even towards those who have wronged them. It can also refer to someone who is quick to anger but equally quick to forgive. Another related expression is "قلبو مافيه والو" ("his heart is clear"), which also conveys a sense of the person's purity and absence of malice.

- "البركة ديالنا" ("*Al-baraka dyalna*")

Translating to "our blessing," this phrase is used in Algerian society to show respect and appreciation towards elders, whether in the family, neighborhood, or broader community. It acknowledges their significant role and contributions, conveying both honor and gratitude.

- "دبر راسك" ("*Dabber rask*")

This expression, meaning "take care of your head," can be used in two contexts: to indicate that someone should handle their own responsibilities or to show agreement with someone's opinion. For example, if someone borrows a book and doesn't return it, the owner might say "دبر راسك" to imply that it's their responsibility. Alternatively, if a father consults his children on a matter and they agree with him, they might use this phrase to express their support.

- "طاحت بيه" ("*ṭāḥat bih*")

Translating to "it fell on him," this idiom is used to describe a situation where someone's health, wealth, or social status declines or is lost. It is versatile and can refer to various forms of misfortune depending on the context.

- "قادر على شقاه" ("*Qādir 'alā shaqqāh*")

This phrase, meaning "capable of handling his problems," is used to describe someone who is adept at managing their own issues or seeking influential intermediaries to resolve them. It signifies a person who is responsible and able to handle challenges effectively.

- "عجينة قديمة" ("*Ajīna qadīma*")

Translating to "old dough," this idiom refers to individuals who are still adhering to traditional customs and practices. It is a figurative way to describe someone from the older generation who maintains old habits and traditions.

- "قلبو كحل" ("*Qalbo khal*")

This expression, which means "his heart is black," is used to describe someone who is envious, resentful, and harbors ill feelings towards others. It conveys a sense of deep-seated malice and hatred.

- "كبر في عيني" ("*Kbar ft 'ayni*")

Translating to "he grew in my eyes," this phrase is used to express admiration or respect for someone who has done a favor or shown kindness. It indicates that the person's stature or importance has increased in the speaker's view.

- "فولة وانقسمت على زوج" ("*Fūla wānqassamat 'alā zouj*")

Meaning "a chick split in two," this idiom describes a situation where two things are extremely similar or identical. It is used to emphasize the high degree of resemblance between the two entities.

- "يجبد ملعرام" ("*Yajbed mal'arām*")

Translating to "pulls out the haphazard words," this phrase refers to someone who uses inappropriate or poorly chosen words when speaking. It indicates a lack of care or skill in selecting the right vocabulary.

- "يموت على القجمة" ("*Y'mūt 'alā al-qajma*")

Meaning "he dies for the jest," this idiom describes a person who loves entertainment and joking around. It signifies a strong affection for fun and humor.

- "عندو لكتاف" ("*Andu lektāf*")

Translating to "he has the shoulders," this phrase is used to describe someone who acts as an intermediary in resolving issues, indicating that the person has influence and authority.

- "كلام مرفه" ("*Kalam m'rafah*")

Meaning "elegant speech," this idiom refers to speech that is rich in good meanings and wisdom. It indicates that the conversation is well-articulated and insightful.

- "لسانو طويل" ("*L'sānu ṭawīl*")

Translating to "his tongue is long," this phrase is used to describe someone who talks excessively, often to the point of being hurtful or offensive to others. It denotes someone who speaks more than necessary, usually in a negative context.

- "هنا يموت قاسي" ("*Hnā yāmūt qāsī*")

This phrase, meaning "he dies harshly here," is a metaphor for stubbornness and refusing to distance oneself from a situation. It signifies a strong resistance to change or retreat.

- "دارو علينا" ("*Dāru 'alaynā*")

Translating to "they turned against us," this idiom indicates betrayal or being let down by someone who was once supportive. It reflects a shift from ally to adversary.

- "على العين والراس" ("*Alā al- 'ayn wa al-rās*")

Meaning "on the eye and the head," this phrase signifies generosity, hospitality, and a warm reception. It expresses that something is done with great care and respect.

- "شباح اللمة" ("*Shabbāḥ al-lamma*")

Translating to "the ghost of the gathering," this idiom describes the importance of a person who is present at a meeting, suggesting that the gathering feels incomplete without them.

- "يخاف من خياله" ("*Ykhāf men khyālu*")

Meaning "he fears his own shadow," this phrase is used to describe excessive or irrational fear. It reflects a heightened level of anxiety beyond what is necessary.

- "يدو ماشي ليه" ("*Yeddu māshī līh*")

Translating to "his hand is not for him," this phrase refers to generosity and giving. It indicates that the person is open-handed and willing to share or donate.

- "راه يخرط" ("*Rāh yakhrūṭ*")

This idiom meaning "he is lying," is used to describe someone who is not being truthful. It signifies dishonesty or fabrication.

- "كرشو كبيرة" ("*Karshu kebīra*")

Translating to "his belly is big," this phrase describes someone who eats a lot and is gluttonous. It reflects a high level of appetite and overeating.

- "كلمتو راس مالمو" ("*Kelmtu rās mālu*")

Meaning "his word is like his capital," this idiom indicates that a person is faithful to their promises and keeps their word. It reflects reliability and trustworthiness.

- "راضي بالقليل" ("*Rāḍī bi-l-qalīl*")

Translating to "content with little," this phrase signifies a person's satisfaction and contentment with whatever they have, reflecting a sense of gratitude and acceptance.

- "فلان كي الذيب" ("*Felān ki dhiib*")

Meaning "so-and-so is like a wolf," this idiom compares someone to a wolf in terms of cunning and deceitfulness. It suggests that the person is sly and manipulative.

- "شد مد" ("*Shedd medd*")

Translating to "hold and stretch," this idiom is used in trade to indicate avoiding debt by paying immediately after purchasing. It features incomplete rhyme.

- "الجار قبل الدار" ("*Al-jār qabl al-dār*")

Meaning "the neighbor before the house," this phrase emphasizes the importance of choosing good neighbors before settling into a new home. It highlights that the quality of neighbors significantly impacts one's comfort. This idiom also features incomplete rhyme.

- "قيس قبل ماتغيس" ("*Qis qabl mā teghis*")

Translating to "measure before you cut," this idiom means that one should carefully consider and evaluate matters before making a decision to avoid mistakes and pitfalls. It also features incomplete rhyme with the repeated letter "s."

- "بدل الساعة بساعة اخرى" ("*Baddal al-sā'a bi-sā'a ukhrā*")

Meaning "exchange one hour for another," this phrase indicates that someone is not ready to talk or joke at the moment. It features complete rhyme.

- "راسو حجرة" ("*Rāsu ḥajra*")

Translating to "his head is a stone," this idiom describes someone who is very stubborn and unwilling to listen to others or engage in discussion.

Conclusion:

In this study, we highlighted the characteristics that distinguish idiomatic expressions from ordinary phrases. These characteristics include their prevalence, their origin in and reflection of society, their structure and rigidity, as well as their opacity and meaning. All these traits make idiomatic expressions particularly impactful for the listener (receiver), evoking a positive reception because they are concise and evocative, unlike lengthy and tedious explanations. They dominate conversations and are frequently present in social gatherings, especially among the elderly who have accumulated life experiences. The distillation of wisdom, proverbs, and lessons from their lived experiences has provided a rich source of insights. Therefore, focusing on this particular group in the applied aspect of our study, which explored rhetorical aspects such as verbal and conceptual embellishments through some of these expressions, was essential.

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