

SEMANTIC AND STYLISTIC ASPECTS OF FRENCH IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract: This article explores the dual nature of French idiomatic expressions through the lenses of semantics and stylistics. Idioms, defined by their formal fixity and semantic opacity, challenge the traditional principle of compositionality. By analyzing the internal mechanisms of linguistic "freezing" (*figement*), this study examines how global meaning emerges through metaphor and metonymy. Furthermore, the article evaluates the stylistic functions of these units such as expressivity, economy of language, and cultural anchoring. We argue that mastering idioms is essential for advanced communicative competence, as they represent the intersection of linguistic rules and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Idiomatic expressions, semantics, stylistics, linguistic freezing, metaphor, phraseology.

Introduction

For students of linguistics and literature, the French language often appears as a rigid system of Cartesian logic. However, beneath this surface lies a vibrant landscape of "phraseological units" commonly known as idioms. An idiomatic expression is a sequence of words whose global meaning cannot be deduced from the individual meanings of its components. For instance, knowing the definitions of "poser" (to place), "un" (a), and "lapin" (a rabbit) does not help a student understand why someone was stood up (*poser un lapin*).

As highlighted by Gaston Gross (1996), these expressions are characterized by "figement" (linguistic freezing or fixity). This article aims to dismantle the mechanics of these expressions to show how they function semantically as single units of meaning and how they serve as powerful stylistic tools for writers and speakers.

2. Semantic Analysis: The Mystery of Global Meaning

The primary challenge of idioms lies in their semantic structure. In standard prose, we rely on the principle of compositionality: the meaning of a sentence is the sum of its parts. Idioms break this rule.

2.1. Non-Compositionality and Opacity

In an idiom, the semantic link between the literal words and the intended message is often severed. This creates varying degrees of "opacity."

- Transparent idioms: Where the metaphor is still visible (e.g., *avoir le cœur sur la main* – to be generous).

- Opaque idioms: Where the origin is lost to time (e.g., *sucrer les fraises* – to be senile/trembling).

2.2. Metaphorical and Metonymic Motivation

Despite their opacity, idioms are rarely random. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that most idioms are rooted in "conceptual metaphors." In French, many expressions regarding emotions are physically motivated:

- Anger as Heat: *La moutarde lui monte au nez* (The mustard is getting to his nose/He is getting angry).

- Fear as Physical Cold: *Avoir la chair de poule* (To have goosebumps).

By analyzing these through a semantic lens, students can see that idioms are not just "fixed phrases" to be memorized, but a reflection of how the human mind maps abstract concepts onto physical experiences.

3. Stylistic Aspects: Beyond Information

While semantics focuses on *what* is said, stylistics focuses on *how* it is said and the effect produced on the reader. For a writer, choosing an idiom over a literal description is a deliberate stylistic act.

3.1. Expressivity and Imagery

Idioms are inherently visual. Saying "*il pleut des cordes*" (it's raining ropes) is stylistically more evocative than the neutral "*il pleut beaucoup*." According to Bally (1951), the founder of modern stylistics, idioms allow a speaker to inject affectivity and emotion into an otherwise dry statement. They transform a fact into a picture.

3.2. Economy of Language

Idioms often function as "cognitive shortcuts." An expression like "*se tenir à carreau*" (to watch one's step/be on one's best behavior) conveys a complex set of social precautions in a few syllables. Stylistically, this provides a "pulse" to the narrative, preventing it from becoming bogged down in overly clinical descriptions.

3.3. Register and Social Marking

The choice of an idiom immediately identifies the speaker's social or situational context. Guiraud (1980) emphasizes that idioms are the primary markers of "level of language" (register).

- Sustained: *Rendre l'âme* (To pass away).
- Current: *Mourir* (To die).
- Slang/Argot: *Clamser* or *Passer l'arme à gauche* (To kick the bucket).

4. Morphosyntactic Constraints and "Fixity"

A fascinating area where semantics meets style is the "frozen" nature of these phrases. Because the meaning is global, the grammatical structure becomes rigid. Meiri (1997) notes that the more "frozen" an expression is, the less it tolerates grammatical transformation.

- The Passive Voice Test: One can say "*Il a cassé sa pipe*" (He died), but one cannot say "*La pipe a été cassée par lui*" without losing the idiomatic meaning entirely.

- Adjective Insertion: If you modify a fixed expression, you often create a "pun" or a stylistic break. If someone says they have a "*faim de petit loup*" (the hunger of a little wolf), they are playing with the idiom "*faim de loup*" (starving) to create a sense of irony or cuteness.

5. Cultural Anchoring and Pragmatics

Idioms are "cultural conservatories." They store the history, geography, and folklore of the French-speaking world.

5.1. Historical Heritage

Many French idioms date back to specific eras or trades. "*Tomber en quenouille*" (to fall into female hands/to fall into neglect) refers to the spinning wheel used by women in the Middle Ages. Understanding these requires what Galisson (1991) calls "lexiciculture" the understanding that words carry the weight of a nation's history.

5.2. Pragmatic Connection

In conversation, using an idiom creates a "connivence" (complicity) between the speaker and the listener. It signals that they belong to the same linguistic community. For your students, this is the hardest part of reading: recognizing that a phrase is not a literal instruction but a shared cultural signal.

6. Comparative Analysis of Selected Idioms

Expression	Literal Translation	Semantic Meaning	Stylistic Effect
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Avoir un poil dans la main	To have a hair in the hand.	To be extremely lazy.	Hyperbolic, humorous imagery.
Casser les pieds à quelqu'un	To break someone's feet.	To annoy someone.	Familiar register, physical metaphor for irritation.
S'occuper de ses oignons	To mind one's onions.	To mind one's own business.	Sharp, colloquial, dismissive.
Vouloir décrocher la lune	To want to unhook the moon.	To aim for the impossible.	Poetic, idealistic imagery.

7. Conclusion

The study of French idiomatic expressions reveals that language is not merely a tool for information exchange, but a playground for metaphor and style. Semantically, these expressions challenge our understanding of how meaning is constructed, moving from individual words to "global blocks" of sense. Stylistically, they provide the "flavor" (*la saveur*) of the language, allowing for nuance, humor, and social signaling.

As Rey (2007) suggests, idioms are where the language stops being a dictionary and starts being a living history. For bachelor students, learning to identify and analyze these expressions is the key to transitioning from "learning French" to "mastering the French spirit."

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