

**LINGUO-PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF IDIOMS WITH AGE-RELATED SEMANTICS
IN ENGLISH**

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Abstract: This article investigates the linguo-pragmatic features of English idioms with age-related semantics. Drawing on corpus data, idiom dictionaries, and literary examples, the study explores the pragmatic functions of these expressions as tools for evaluation, categorization, and representation of age characteristics. Special attention is paid to their role in shaping cultural stereotypes, their pragmatic markedness, and their functions in both everyday and literary communication. The findings contribute to our understanding of how language reflects cultural attitudes toward aging, youth, maturity, and the life cycle.

Keywords: idioms, age semantics, linguo-pragmatics, English language, stereotype, pragmatic function.

1. Introduction

Idioms are integral to language, encapsulating cultural knowledge, social expectations, and collective experience. Among idioms, those related to age offer insight into how societies conceptualize human development, social roles, and life transitions. English idioms with age-related semantics serve as linguistic markers that not only describe biological aging but also convey attitudes, judgments, and stereotypes.

This article aims to analyze the linguo-pragmatic features of such idioms, focusing on their functions in discourse, their role in shaping stereotypes, and their pragmatic markedness. The study is situated within the broader context of cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and cultural linguistics.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Linguo-pragmatics and idioms

Linguo-pragmatics examines the interaction between language and context, focusing on how linguistic forms fulfill communicative purposes (Leech, 1983; Norrick, 1985). Idioms, as fixed multi-word expressions, are pragmatically potent—they encode speaker attitudes, social norms, and cultural frames (Nunberg et al., 1994; Fernando, 1996). Their comprehension relies on shared cultural knowledge and context-sensitive interpretation.

2.2 Age as a semantic and cultural category

Age is a universal but culturally mediated category. Idioms with age semantics draw on metaphorical imagery (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), cultural frames, and social stereotypes (Kövecses, 2002; Wierzbicka, 2006). They function not only as descriptors but as evaluative and identity-forming tools, reflecting societal attitudes toward youth, maturity, and aging.

3. Materials and Methodology

The study employs a mixed-method approach:

- **Data sources:** British National Corpus (BNC), Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), idiom dictionaries (Ammer, 2013; Spears, 2015), literary texts (e.g., Dickens, Austen, Twain), and authentic media samples.
- **Analytical framework:** qualitative analysis of pragmatic functions and connotations, complemented by quantitative observations on idiom frequency and distribution.
- **Focus:** identification of age-related idioms, analysis of their pragmatic roles, and examination of their cultural embedding.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Classification of age-related idioms

Idioms are grouped into three main age stages:

- **Childhood and youth**
 - *wet behind the ears* (inexperienced)
 - *greenhorn* (novice)
 - *no spring chicken* (not young anymore)
- **Adulthood and maturity**
 - *in the prime of life*
 - *at the height of one's powers*
 - *old hand* (experienced person)
- **Old age**
 - *over the hill* (past one's prime)
 - *long in the tooth* (old)
 - *twilight years* (final years)
 - *you can't teach an old dog new tricks* (resistance to change)

4.2 Pragmatic functions

Age-related idioms fulfill various pragmatic functions:

- **Evaluation and judgment:** Express approval or disapproval (e.g., *over the hill* implies decline; *wise old owl* suggests respect).
- **Categorization and life-staging:** Mark social or biological stages (e.g., *coming of age*).
- **Representation and stereotyping:** Reinforce or challenge cultural norms (e.g., *no spring chicken* pokes fun at aging; *in the prime of life* idealizes maturity).
- **Humor and mitigation:** Soften criticism or tease playfully (e.g., *still wet behind the ears*).

4.3 Pragmatic markedness

Idioms vary in pragmatic markedness:

- **Pejorative:** *doddering old fool*, *ancient relic*, *over the hill*
- **Meliorative:** *wise old owl*, *aged to perfection*, *full of years*
- **Neutral:** *middle-aged spread*, *twilight years*

Markedness often shifts with context. For example, *old hand* can signal expertise in a work context but imply obsolescence in informal settings.

4.4 Idioms in literature

Literary texts illustrate idioms' emotional and stylistic power:

- **Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*:** "I'm a man of sixty, but I still have my wits about me."
- **Jane Austen, *Emma*:** "In the autumn of life, one must harvest joys with care."

- **Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:** “Pap was old, but he wasn’t wise; just mean and used-up.”

These examples reveal how idioms enrich character development and convey social commentary.

4.5 Corpus findings

- *Over the hill* and *long in the tooth* occur most frequently in media and informal discourse.
- *Twilight years* is more common in literary and formal registers.
- Youth idioms like *greenhorn* are declining in frequency, while *no spring chicken* remains robust.

5. Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Compared to English, Russian and Uzbek idioms often emphasize social roles and wisdom in old age:

- Russian: *седина в бороде, бес в ребро* (“gray in beard, devil in ribs” → mischievous older man)
- Uzbek: *ko ‘pni ko ‘rgan boboy* (“old man who has seen a lot” → respected elder)

English idioms tend to foreground individual physical and cognitive decline, reflecting a more individualistic and sometimes ageist perspective.

6. Conclusion

English idioms with age-related semantics function as potent pragmalinguistic devices, shaping social perception, evaluating behavior, and reinforcing or challenging stereotypes. They serve multiple functions—evaluative, categorial, representational, humorous—and exhibit varying pragmatic markedness. Understanding these idioms enriches our grasp of the cultural scripts underlying language use and highlights the interaction between language, cognition, and society.

Future research should focus on:

- Empirical corpus studies across genres and registers
- Cross-linguistic comparisons of age idioms
- The evolution of age idioms in contemporary discourse

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