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Exploring the Richness of English Idioms with Numbers

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Abstract. Idioms are a fascinating aspect of language, offering unique insights into cultural nuances and the figurative nature of communication. This article delves into a specific category of idioms: those containing numbers. By examining the usage and origins of idiomatic expressions featuring numbers, this study aims to shed light on the linguistic and cultural significance of numerical references in English.

Drawing upon a comprehensive collection of idioms, the article presents a diverse range of numerical idiomatic expressions. It explores their meanings, providing examples to illustrate their usage in different contexts. It also explores their structure and their syntactic roles in different examples. The research investigates the figurative interpretations associated with numbers.

Furthermore, the article delves into the cultural and historical origins of selected idioms, tracing their roots and evolutions over time. It explores how numerical idioms have permeated various domains, including literature, popular culture, and everyday conversations. Through this exploration, the article highlights the enduring relevance and impact of numerical idioms on contemporary language use.

By analyzing the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of numerical idioms, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between language, culture, and cognition. It underscores the richness and complexity of idiomatic expressions in English and offers valuable insights for language learners, educators, and researchers interested in their study.

Keywords: Number Idioms, English, Linguistic, Cultural Significance.

1 Introduction

1.1 Some theoretical background

Idioms are the colorful gems of language, encapsulating cultural wisdom, metaphorical richness, and linguistic flair. Generally speaking, they are unique linguistic constructions whose meanings often cannot be derived from the individual words that comprise them. Instead, their interpretation relies on cultural and contextual knowledge. First, here are some of the main characteristics of idioms: as far as their definition is concerned, it is said that idioms are fixed, non-literal expressions that have a meaning that differs from the sum of their individual parts. They often convey cultural, historical, or social nuances and are deeply rooted in a specific language or community [1]. Idioms are a subset of figurative language, which includes metaphors,

similes, and other forms of expression that deviate from literal meaning to create vivid imagery and convey abstract concepts [2]. While some idiomatic expressions might be found across different languages, many idioms are culture and language-specific. This highlights the importance of cultural context in understanding idiomatic meanings [3]. Research on idioms often explores how they are processed in the human mind. Cognitive linguists investigate the mental mechanisms that allow people to comprehend idiomatic language and how idioms are stored in memory [4]. Idioms serve various pragmatic functions in language, such as conveying humor, sarcasm, or social identity. Studying idioms helps researchers understand how language is used to achieve specific communicative goals [5]. Idioms often reflect cultural values and norms. Their use can vary depending on factors like age, region, and social group, making them important in sociolinguistic research [6]. Some idioms have fascinating historical origins, and their meanings may evolve over time. Studying the history of idiomatic expressions sheds light on language change and cultural shifts [7]. Understanding idioms requires a multifaceted approach that combines linguistic analysis, cognitive psychology, and cultural studies, among other disciplines. Research in these areas contributes to a deeper appreciation of the richness and complexity of idiomatic language use. Within the vast tapestry of English idiomatic expressions, a particular subset stands out—those infused with numbers, which have the same characteristics as other types of idioms. From *in one fell swoop* to *on cloud nine*, these numerical idioms weave a fascinating narrative of language and culture. In this article, we embark on a journey to unravel the mysteries behind English idioms containing numbers, exploring their origins, meanings, cultural significance and their structure as well.

2 The Power of Numbers

Numbers have long held symbolic and cultural significance across different societies. Harnessing their power, idiomatic expressions employ numbers to evoke vivid imagery, convey emotion, and add depth to everyday conversations. Whether it's the luck of *lucky seven* or the elusive *catch-22*, numerical idioms become linguistic shortcuts that paint a picture with just a few words.

Let us now dive into the diverse realm of idioms containing numbers. We encounter the enigmatic *six of one, half a dozen of the other*, which highlights the equivalence of two choices. Meanwhile, *third wheel* and *fifth wheel* depict social dynamics by describing unwanted companionship.

Many of these number expressions are more idiomatic than others. Their meanings are very difficult to be interpreted without a given context. *Bat a thousand*, for example, is used to show that someone is very successful at something to be accomplished. English people can use *deep-six* if they want to get rid of something or someone, and *a dime a dozen* in order to describe something as cheap and common. They should also know that if they *get the third degree*, they are to be questioned in great detail about a certain situation. *To have someone's number*, on the other hand, has a totally different meaning from the literal one. It is interpreted as getting the key information to be able to understand someone. English language users are aware that if they want

something to be done very quickly, they can add more color to the situation by saying *in two shakes of a lamb's tail*. A person, who is not very smart or clever, can be called *one sandwich short of a picnic* or *two bricks shy of a load*, which is not in fact a very good way to address to people, no matter how many mistakes they can make. *A stitch in time saves nine* may serve as a very good piece of advice in order to prevent any damage or mistake to become worse. One may wonder why a person who is drunk is described as *three sheets to the wind* [8].

Native English speakers associate the interpretation of some idioms with certain fields, such as sport: *hole in one*, *have two strikes against (one)*, *behind the eight ball*, *not touch with a ten-foot pole* – to name a few (related to golf, baseball, billiards, and athletics, respectively). These number idioms and many more demonstrate the power of numbers to encapsulate complex situations and emotions within concise expressions.

3 Unraveling Origins and Evolution

Just like language itself, idioms evolve and adapt over time. Through etymological exploration, we unearth the historical and cultural origins of numerical idioms. Only a few examples are provided. For instance, *on cloud nine* traces its roots to the United States during the 1950s, where weather enthusiasts classified clouds based on altitude. This idiom, originally *on cloud seven*, illustrates the ever-changing nature of language and the cultural contexts that shape idiomatic expressions [8].

The phrase *as phony as a three-dollar bill* is an American idiom used to describe something or someone as fake, counterfeit, or not genuine. The origin of this expression is not entirely clear, but it likely dates back to the late 19th or early 20th century. It's important to note that the use of the term "phony" to mean fake or counterfeit was popularized in the United States during the early 20th century. While there isn't a specific documented source for the exact origin of this phrase, it's believed to have emerged during a time when counterfeit currency was a significant concern in the United States. Three-dollar bills, however, were never issued by the U.S. government, making the phrase a humorous way of emphasizing something's falseness [8]. The usage of the idiom likely evolved over time as part of American colloquial language, influenced by cultural and historical factors related to counterfeit money.

The idiom *at sixes and sevens* means to be in a state of confusion, disorder, or disarray. The origin of this phrase is a bit unclear, but it dates back several centuries and is thought to have originated in English in the late Middle Ages. There are a few theories about its origin, but none of them are definitively proven and they only provide some historical context for the phrase: One theory suggests that the phrase originated in the 14th century in London when two prominent trade guilds, the Merchant Taylors and the Skinners, were in dispute over their order of precedence, and the phrase may have emerged as a way to describe the disorder and uncertainty that resulted from this decision [9]. Another theory suggests that the phrase has its origins in medieval gambling with dice [10]. In this context, "sixes" and "sevens" may have been difficult or

unlucky numbers to roll, leading to a state of uncertainty and confusion for the players.

The phrase *take five* is an idiom that means to take a short break, usually for five minutes. Its origin can be traced back to the world of jazz music. The expression is closely associated with the jazz saxophonist Paul Desmond and his composition "Take Five," which was recorded by the Dave Brubeck Quartet in 1959 [11]. As the song and the phrase gained popularity, *take five* started to be used more broadly outside of jazz circles to refer to taking a short break or intermission. The phrase's usage beyond jazz contexts is a testament to the cultural impact of this musical genre.

The phrase *catch-22* originates from Joseph Heller's 1961 novel "Catch-22." It is a satirical work set during World War II and explores the absurdity, bureaucracy, and paradoxical nature of war and military institutions. In the book, the phrase refers to a paradoxical and absurd rule governing the behavior of military personnel [12]. The phrase *catch-22* has since entered common usage to describe any situation in which a person is trapped by contradictory rules or conditions that make it impossible to escape a dilemma. It's used broadly to refer to a paradoxical or circular situation in which there is no easy or logical solution.

The phrase *deep-six* is a nautical term that means to discard something or throw it overboard into the deep sea, usually in a manner that ensures it won't resurface. Its origin can be traced to maritime and naval terminology. The term "deep-six" has been in use in nautical contexts since at least the 1920s and became more widely known in American English during and after World War II [13]. It gradually extended beyond maritime usage to describe the act of getting rid of something permanently or irretrievably.

The phrase *the three R's* refers to the fundamental elements of education: reading, writing, and arithmetic (often pronounced as "rithmetic"). The origin of this phrase can be traced back to the 18th and 19th centuries when these three skills were considered the basic building blocks of education [8]. Over time, the phrase became ingrained in educational discourse and remains widely recognized to this day. While there may not be a specific source that definitively documents the first use of *the three R's*, it is a term that has been used for centuries to describe the foundational skills taught in early education.

However, it should be noticed that some numerical idioms often transcend linguistic boundaries, offering insights into shared human experiences. Expressions like: *all in one breath*, *in one ear and out the other*, *one jump ahead*, *seventh heaven*, *sixth sense*, *two heads are better than one*, *one thing leads to another*, *know a trick or two*, *kill two birds with one stone*, etc. [8] find resonance in different cultures, despite variations in language and context (being used almost in the same way in Albanian). Examining such cross-cultural idioms allows us to celebrate the universal threads that bind humanity together through language and expression.

4 The structure and functions

As far as their structure is concerned, numerical idioms appear as belonging with several types of syntactic units, such as Noun Phrases, Verb Phrases, Prepositional Phrases, etc. Some examples are mentioned below: NP: *quick one, forty winks, hole in one, nine-day wonder, number one, one hell/heck of a (someone or something), sixth sense, seventh heaven, three R's*, etc. VP: *put two and two together, stand on one's own two feet, take five, deep-six, two-time (someone), cast the first stone, give me five, get the third degree, not touch (someone or something) with a ten-foot pole, not give too hoots about (someone or something)*, etc. PP: *at one time, at one with (someone), at sixes and sevens, at the eleventh hour, in one fell swoop, in two shakes of a lamb's tail, on all fours, on cloud nine, like two peas in a pod*, etc.

These are just a few of many more examples to be mentioned. There are also plenty numerical idioms which have the structure of a sentence with a subject, predicate and other secondary elements: *One good turn deserves another. One man's meat is another man's poison. One thing leads to another. There's more than one way to skin a cat. Two heads are better than one. Two can play that game. A stitch in time saves nine. It takes two to tango. Two wrongs don't make a right. Two's company, three's a crowd*. etc.

What about their syntactic roles within the sentences where different numbers appear? Some examples are provided to analyze the role of each number expression in relation to the other elements within the sentences. First, here are some examples with numerical expressions playing the role of the direct object being used after transitive verbs: *The sport's federation made an eleventh-hour decision to suspend the star player. The golfer got a hole in one during his first round of golf. I ordered the food and when the two plates arrived, I took the lesser of the two. The rock band played several one-night stands last month. Many people believe that teaching the three R's is the most important role for schools*. etc. Second, there are many cases when the numerical idioms play the role of the subject predicative being used with copular verbs (mainly the verb be): *I was as busy as a one-armed paperhanger during the last two weeks. The woman's excuses are as phony as a three-dollar bill and I do not believe any of them. It is a catch-22 situation; if I go to work, there will be problems but if I do not go to work, there will also be problems. I did not want to take the job but it was the lesser of two devils because having no job, was even worse. The girls are like two peas in a pod and are very good friends. My sister has been on cloud nine since she won the money in the contest. My uncle has been six feet under for five years now. The man is two bricks shy of a load and he is very hard to deal with*. etc. Third, there are also many other examples in which the numerical idioms play the role of the adverbials, found in different positions and being used with all types of verbs: *The schedule of my boss is always changing but nine times out of ten he is in his office on Monday morning. I will return in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Ten to one, our secretary will come to work late again. I do not like that man – not one iota. We only go to the small Mexican restaurant once in a while. The piano arrived at its destination all in one piece. In one fell swoop my friend got a new car, a new job and a new girlfriend. I told my friend about the accident all in one breath*. etc. Fourth, numerical idioms also play the role of the attribute by modifying different nouns, either in pre-

position or post-position: *Our university has the one and only medical imaging system in the country. The man walked down the street with three sheets to the wind., etc.*

Conclusions

English idioms containing numbers are more than mere linguistic curiosities. They offer glimpses into cultural heritage, thought patterns, and the innate human tendency to find meaning in numbers. Exploring the origins, meanings, cross-cultural dimensions, and structure of numerical idioms enriches our understanding of language as a living, evolving entity.

As we navigate the intricate world of idioms, we can appreciate the numerical charms that grace the English language. These idiomatic expressions with numbers, as all the other types of idioms, breathe life into conversations, transcend borders, and weave together the fabric of shared human experience. So, whenever encountering an idiom with a number, native and non-native English speakers could embrace its metaphorical beauty and savor the magic of language's numerical tapestry.

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