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**Unravelling Urdu Idioms**

**Abrar Hussain Qureshi, Ph.D. Candidate**

# Unravelling Urdu Idioms

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## Introduction

Urdu is rich in idiomatic expressions. This research paper makes a contribution to the description of Urdu idioms. It describes the key syntactic, semantic, grammatical, etc. features that govern the formation and use of idioms in Urdu.

Idioms cover a core part in any lexicon. Description of idioms across the languages is not a new phenomenon. Contributions by Palmer (1933), Hockett (1958) and Malkiel's (1959) detailed description of "binomials" and his doctoral thesis (1972) were useful contributions to the study of idiomaticity. Alexander (1984, 1987), Sinclair (1991), MacCarthy (1992, 1998), and Moon (1998) also described idioms from different perspectives.

## Idiom Principle

In his "Idiom Principle" Sinclair (1991) states that words tend to cluster together in systematic ways. We have already seen this in the collocational patterning of words. But sometimes the patterning becomes so regular that the resulting cluster seems to be more than simply words with collocational ties. Rather, the words take on aspects of a single entity, that is, a string of words acts as single lexemes with a single meaning. When this happens, those lexemes are called "multiword units". There are a great variety of multiword units. Idioms are one of them.

## Definition of Idiom

Dubrovin (1995) defines "idiom" to be a set of phraseological units which meaning does not result from the meaning of its components. The definition by Dean Curry (1994) is "the assigning of a new meaning to a group of words which already have their own meaning". Moon (1998) notes that idioms are typically institutionalized, lexico-grammatically fixed and non-compositional expressions. Collins (2000) defines idioms as a group of words, which have a different meaning when used together from the one it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually and that are usually employed in everyday language to precisely express ideas and concepts that cannot be compressed into a single word. Moreover, to complicate things further, within each of these subclasses, every idiom has its own syntactic, semantic and pragmatic configuration.

## The Notion of Semantic Constituent In Aid of the Definition of Idiom

Fortunately, it is possible to define an idiom precisely and non-circularly using the notion of semantic constituent. We shall require two things of an idiom: first, that it

should be lexically complex, i.e., it should consist of more than one lexical constituent; second, that it should be a single minimal semantic constituent.”

### Characteristics of Idioms

From this point of view, all idioms are elementary lexical units. It is interesting that although idioms consist of more than one word; they display to some extent the sort of internal cohesion that we expect of single words. For instance, they typically resist interruption and re-ordering of parts. Some of the restriction of syntactic potential of idioms is semantically motivated.

Generally idioms have the following characteristics:

**i. Non-compositionality:** The meaning of an idiom is not a straightforward composition of the meaning of its parts (Katamba 1993). For example, the meaning of *آسمان سے تارے توڑنا* *aasmaan ke taarey toorna* (to try an impossible work) has nothing to do with *آسمان* *aasmaan* (sky) and *تارے* *taarey* (stars). Idioms are widely defined as being non-compositional (Langacker, 1986) or even compositional after the meaning is known (Numberg et al. 1994).

**ii. Non-substitutability:** We cannot substitute a word in an idiom with a related word. For example, we cannot say *فلک سے تارے توڑنا* *falak (sky) se taarey toorna* instead of *آسمان سے تارے توڑنا* *aasman se taarey toorna* although both *آسمان* *aasman* and *فلک* *falak* are synonyms.

**iii. Non-modifiability:** We cannot modify an idiom or apply syntactic transformations. For example, *نیلے آسمان سے تارے توڑنا* *neelay (blue) aasman se taarey toorna* has nothing to do with executing an impossible work. Some idioms are fixed, and do not present internal variation, while there is also a large proportion of idioms that allow for different degrees of internal variability, and with a variable number of elements.

**iv. Institutionalization:** According to Grant and Bauer (2004), institutionalization refers to the degree of recognition a particular phrase meets in a speech community. There are idioms that have cultural roots and are understood only by those communities that share the same cultural values.

### Lexical Idioms and Phrase Idioms: Some Tests

A difference may be carved out between lexical idioms and phrase idioms; the two types being defined on syntactic grounds.

Basically, the former are syntactically dominated by one of the lowest syntactic (grammatical) categories, namely by noun, adjective, verb; while the latter, on the contrary, cannot be described like that.

In this regard, the expressions آسمان سے تارے توڑنا *asman se taarey toorna* (to try an impossible work) or آنکھیں دکھانا *ankhain dekhana* (to threat or stare) would be lexical idioms.

Another test is whether the words within it are separated in the utterance in the same way you might do with others of its type? Can اونے پونے بیچنا *owne powne baichna* (to sell at lower price) be separated and does it mean the same thing as the original utterance? Obviously, it is not possible.

Other less convincing cases can be made for tests that show that idioms are often not syntactically fully formed, that is, the idiom can't be used in certain grammatical patterns. If we use, منڈی تیز ہے *mandi taiz hay* (prices are higher in the market) in an imperative sentence تیز ہو جا ، بازار *bazaar, taiz ho ja* (market, get speed), the meaning changes and sometimes there is a loss of meaning.

Another test may be whether the idiom is more frequent than the literal counterpart in text. That is often not the case as in خون سفید ہونا *khoon sufaid hona* (the decay of love) or دانت کھٹے کرنا *daant khatay karna* (to defeat). It is comparatively difficult for a non-native speaker to recognize immediately the intended meaning of many idioms.

### **Idioms and Figurative Expressions**

A traditional definition of idiom by Cruse (1995) runs roughly as “an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of its parts.” Although at first straightforward, there is an element of circularity in this definition. Does it indicate that the meaning of an idiom cannot be inferred from (or, more precisely, cannot be accounted for as a compositional function of) the meaning the parts carry in that expression? But equally clearly these ‘other expressions’ must be chosen with care. The definition must be understood as stating that an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be accounted for as a compositional function of the meanings, its parts have, when they are not parts of idioms. The circularity is now plain: to apply the definition, we must already be in a position to distinguish idiomatic from non-idiomatic expression.

We may apply this test before determining an idiom: (1) is it obscure? (2) is it poetical? (3) is it unchangeable?

Idioms are obscure, meaning that they don't translate literally. The phrase in Urdu کالی بلی *kalli billi* (black cat) isn't an idiom, because it translates just fine. In this same way, aphorisms and proverbs, like "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" aren't idioms. Idioms are poetic.

There are examples of similes, metaphors, analogies, allegories, allusions, jargon, slang, euphemisms, colloquialisms and other figures of speech if changing a word doesn't void the meaning of a phrase, then the phrase is probably not an idiom.

For example, changing "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" to "a bird in the hand is worth two in the tree" leaves the meaning substantially intact, and so it's not an idiom. But changing even an article upsets and even nullifies the meaning of the idioms.

Grant and Bauer (2004, P.51) even maintain a difference between idioms and figurative expressions. According to them, though idioms and figurative language are various subtypes of multi-word units that are non-compositional, yet a distinction may be drawn between these two classes. In comparing figurative language and idioms, they argue:

1. Figurative language is recognised as compositionally involving an untruth which can be reinterpreted pragmatically to understand the intended truth ("He is a small fish in a big pond"), but idioms cannot ("It is a red herring").
2. Figurative language can be undone or 'unpicked' to work out the meaning (He's gone off the rails = he's no longer on the rails = he's not moving forward in a controlled, guided way) but idioms cannot (He's not swinging the lead, his GP sent him here) (or at least cannot without non-linguistic, historical knowledge, cf. red herring).

Briefly speaking, most of the idioms cannot be interpreted. Their meaning can only be guessed while figurative expressions can be made sense with their compositional meaning.

## Urdu and Its Idioms

Urdu is a rich language as far as idioms are concerned. Native speakers of any language do not frequently use idioms so is the case with Urdu, yet they are often referred to in speech and text.

## Semantic Description of Urdu Idioms

There are many sources of the description of idioms but the most important one is their meaning. This is why a native speaker does not notice that an idiom is incorrect grammatically. If the source of an idiom is known, it is sometimes easier to imagine its meaning. Fellbaum (2005) made a distinction between semantically decomposable and non-decomposable idiom. Decomposable idiom has nothing to do with whether or not it is possible to guess the meaning of an idiom or its metaphorical motivation.

Instead decomposable idiom is only intended to mean that, parts of the meaning of the idiom are associated with parts of the idiom. Example of decomposable idiom in Urdu is *آٹھ آٹھ آنسو رولانا* *aath aath aanso rolana* (to make someone weep bitterly) while typical non-decomposable idiom is *آسمان سے تارے توڑنا* *aasman se taarey toorna* (to try an impossible work). *آسمان سے تارے توڑنا* *Aasman se taarey torna* roughly means to try an impossible work, i.e., it is a one-place relation in which "the sky" plays no role, and instead the meaning to try an impossible work is associated with the whole idiom.

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But it is not important whether all idioms can be classified into these two types without problems. According to Sailer (2003) many idioms are clearly based on conceptual metaphors. The idea that the meanings of the constituents of most idioms are available during processing and contribute to understand idiom meaning, has figured prominently in the study of idiom strings both within linguistics and, particularly, within psychology (Glucksberg, 2001). Semantically, idioms in Urdu have also all these characteristics.

### Classification of Idioms in Urdu

Idioms in the Urdu language may be classified according to their degree of internal and structural ambiguities.

1. Complex idioms: The meanings of these idioms cannot be deduced from their constituents:

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
گل کھلانا <i>gull khilana</i>	To blossom a flower	to create problem
تارے گننا <i>taaray gin-naa</i>	To count the stars	to wake in night

2. Semi-complex: These idioms often have the metaphorical meanings. The semi-complex idioms are comparatively less unintelligible and the meaning might be worked out after a little effort:

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
انگاروں پہ لیٹنا trouble <i>angaroon pe lautna</i>	To walk on burning coals	To be in serious
چراغ گل ہونا <i>charaag gul hona</i>	The flowering of candle	End of one's life

3. Transparent: In transparent Idioms, meanings can be deduced very easily as in the case:

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
دل دکھانا <i>dil dookhana</i>	To pain the heart	To hurt
جوہر دکھانا <i>joher dikhana</i>	To show power	To show worth

### Semantic Complexity of Urdu Idioms

The semantic complexity of Urdu idioms may be described in another way:

1. First constituent item in its derived reading:

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
ایڑھی چوٹی کا زور لگانا <i>aeree choti ka zore lagana</i>	To try with strong heel	To try strongly
بال بال بچنا <i>ball ball bachna</i>	To escape without losing a single hair	To have a narrow escape

2. Second constituent item in its derived reading

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
ٹیڑھی کھیر <i>taehri kheer</i>	Threefold dessert	A difficult task
زندگی سے ہاتھ دھونا <i>zindggi se haath dhona</i>	To wash hands with life	To end one's life

3. Expression as a whole in its derived, idiomatic reading:

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
خون سفید ہونا <i>khoon sufaid hona</i>	Whitening of blood	Decay of love
آستین کا سانپ <i>asteen ka saanp</i>	A snake in cuff	A hidden enemy

### **Syntactic Description of Urdu Idioms**

Cruse (1986) opines, the question of precisely which syntactic processes a particular idiom will undergo is an extremely complex one. In some respects it seems to be idiosyncratically determined, and in other respects predictable.

As a first approximation, we may say that an idiom's syntactic behaviour is broadly determined by two factors: the syntactic structure of the literal counterpart of the idiom (if it has one), and the fact that distinguishable syntactic constituents are not semantic constituents, and, therefore, are not open, for instance, to adjectival and adverbial modification, nor can they be isolated for emphasis (1986).

However, syntactic description of idioms provides information on syntax that can help learners see the various grammatical patterns of an idiom (Cowie et al. 1983/1993).

Though the syntactic structures of Urdu idioms are very diverse yet a large number of idioms in the Urdu language consist of combinations of noun+verb, noun+noun, and adjective+noun. Here are a few examples:

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i. Noun + Verb

<u>Urdu Idiom</u>	<u>Literal Meaning</u>	<u>Actual Meaning</u>
آنکھیں دکھانا <i>ankhain dikhana</i>	To show eyes	To be angry
دماغ کھانا <i>dimagh khana</i>	To eat brains	To irritate or pester

ii. Noun+postposition+Noun:

Another most commonly found structure in Urdu idioms is noun+postposition+noun:

<u>Urdu Idiom</u>	<u>Literal Meaning</u>	<u>Actual Meaning</u>
آستین کاساںپ <i>asteen ka saamp</i>	The snake of your cuffs	The betrayer
پتھر پہ لکیر <i>pathar peh lakir</i>	Line on the stone	Impossible to change

iii. Adjective+Noun:

<u>Urdu Idiom</u>	<u>Literal Meaning</u>	<u>Actual Meaning</u>
کالا چور <i>kala chor</i>	black thief	An unknown person
کتابی کیڑا <i>kitaabi keera</i>	bookish worm	Fond of reading books

### **Grammatical Classification of Urdu Idioms**

Idioms may be adjectival, adverbial, verbal, or nominal.

i. Verbal idioms

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
چاندی ہونا <i>chandi hona</i>	To become silver	To get huge profit
ٹھنڈا ہونا <i>thanda hona</i>	To become cool	To die

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## ii. Adverbial idioms

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
چشمِ زدن میں In the flickering of an eye <i>chasme zaden mey</i>		In no time
پلک جھپکتے ہی <i>palak jhapaktey hi</i>	In the closing of an eye lash	In no time

## iii. Adjectival Idioms

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
دھواں دھار <i>dhowaan dhaar</i>	full of smoke	emotional
کاٹھ کا اُلُو <i>kaath ka ulloo</i>	owl of wood	foolish

## iv. Nominal idioms

<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Actual meaning</u>
کالا چور <i>kala chore</i>	black thief	An unknown person
بھاڑے کا تٹو <i>bhaarey ka tatto</i>	cattle of carpenter	white elephant

## Cultural Description of Urdu Idioms

According to Schmitt (2000), idioms tend to be among the most fixed of multiword units and are, in essence, often colloquial metaphors — terms which require some foundational knowledge, information, or experience, to use only within a culture where parties must have common reference. As cultures are typically localized, idioms are more often not useful for communication outside of that local context. However some idioms can be more universally used than others, and they can be easily translated, or their metaphorical meaning can be more easily deduced.

Urdu has also a large collection of idioms that have strong cultural roots. They may not be found in other societies and communities that do not share same cultural values. Many idiomatic expressions in Urdu come from the everyday life. There are many which have to do with food and cooking. In these idioms there is a word that carries the entire cultural background and makes considerable impact on the overall meaning of that idiom.

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<u>Urdu idioms</u>	<u>Literal meaning</u>	<u>Figurative meaning</u>
عید کا چاند ہونا <i>eid ka chand hona</i>	To be the moon of Eid	once in a blue moon
ملا کی دوڑ مسجد تک <i>mulla ki daur masjid tak</i>	moolah runs to the mosque	Someone with limited reach or vision

### **Inflection of Urdu Idioms**

Although we claim that collocations are lexical units, they are not cemented and there are all sorts of possibilities of remaking them. Idioms are not, either, but we think of them as the set end of the continuum from loose to set collocation (Hatch and Brown, 1995, p.202).

An idiom can have a regular structure, an irregular, or even a grammatically incorrect structure. A native speaker is not consciously aware of this inconsistency when in spite of the irregular form, the meaning is always clear. Sometimes there is a regular form but the meaning is not clear and sometimes both meaning and forms are irregular. Inflection in idioms is not a strong tradition in most languages but inflect they do, though in a very restricted manner.

Similarly, idioms in Urdu are also inflected, the inflectional affixes are carried by the grammatically appropriate elements within the idiom, whether or not they are semantic constituents; that is to say, the elements of an idiom retain at least some of their grammatical identity. Idioms in Urdu are inflected sometimes according to their gender, and sometimes according to their tense, and number, though a great majority of Urdu idioms are uninflected:

Urdu idiom	Gender		Number		Tense	
	Masculine	Feminine	Singular	Plural	Present infinitive	Past
آستین کا سانپ <i>asteen ka saanp</i> ( betrayer)	کا <i>ka</i>	کی <i>ki</i>		کے <i>kay</i>		
ٹھنڈا ہونا <i>thanda hona</i> (To die)	ٹھنڈا <i>thanda</i>	ٹھنڈی <i>thandi</i>		ٹھنڈے <i>thanday</i>		

کالی بھیرٹ <i>kali bheir</i> (Black sheep)			بھیرٹ <i>bheir</i>	بھیرٹیں <i>bheiren</i>		
کالا چور <i>Kala chore</i> unknown person			کالا <i>kala</i> کالے <i>kalay</i>			
گدھا بنانا <i>ghada banana</i> To befool					بنانا <i>banana</i>	بنایا <i>banaaya</i>

Table: Inflection of Urdu Idioms

### Concluding Remarks

The description of lexical idioms of the Urdu language, in particular, poses several problems. Some of the regional dialects of Urdu have their own peculiar idioms that may create problems of comprehension even for the mother tongue speakers of standard Urdu.

English-Urdu idioms are another variety that needs to be taken into account when we identify a particular idiom as an idiom of the standard dialect, etc. because Urdu is rapidly modernizing itself with idioms from English. The rural and urban divide further adds to the peculiar situation.

Moreover, idioms do change through the years (Seidel and McMrdie, 1978). Changes may take place within a generation itself. If a language is actively used in certain dynamic domains such as political expressions, newspapers, movies and theater, realistic fiction and drama, and in frequent dialogues between groups that speak different dialects of the same languages, or communicate through another language frequently, or adopt a hybrid form of expression that is currently noticed among all the educated classes of Pakistan irrespective of their mother tongue background, new coinages are brought about continuously.

This is an exciting field for any enterprising student of linguistics and applied linguistics. Though in this paper I have attempted to provide a comprehensive discussion of Urdu idioms yet, it is far from being through. In spite of the dearth of research work on Urdu idioms, it has been my focused attempt and intention to explore its various dimensions. However, all these dimensions might not have been investigated in the end. I hope that this paper will motivate linguists to explore more dimensions of Urdu idioms in more detail.

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