

Idiomatic Expressions of Number in Persian and English

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Abstract Numbers are widely used to form such metaphorical idioms as 'at sixes and sevens', 'to be on cloud nine' and 'three sheets to the wind'. A question arises as to how these number-related expressions acquire their metaphorical significance. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and in the light of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the present study investigates the relationship between language and culture in the construction of idiomatic expressions of number in English and Persian. The working hypothesis in the present study is that although numbers have similar denotations across cultures, idiomatic expressions of number may represent culture-specific concepts.

Keywords: number, Persian, culture, English, idiom, metaphorical language

1. Introduction

Human beings have the ability to count and form numbers. Viewed symbolically, numbers represent more than quantities; they also express qualities (Zhang, 2007). Number are widely used to form idioms such as 'at sixes and sevens', 'the lesser of two evils' and 'a stitch in time saves nine' in English and 'hæšteš geroje noheše' (his eight is pawned for his nine; used when someone's income fails to meet his expenditure), 'je sær dâre væ hezâr sodâ' (he has one head and one thousand wishes; used for a person who is flat out for work) in Persian (see Parvaresh *et al.*, 2012 for phonetic transcription symbols in Persian). In these examples, the numbers have lost their surface meaning and have to be understood non-literally.

Broadly speaking, metaphoricity is one of the main features of human languages (Goalty, 1997). Idioms are not arbitrarily combined strings of words but rather are the products of our encyclopedic knowledge (Kovecses, 2002, 2005). Arguably, idiomatic expressions have a relativistic nature and are culture-bound. Novel conceptions and different mental structures may influence the creation of idioms.

Despite abundant research on idiomatic expressions, it seems that idiomatic expressions of number (hereafter IENs) have been left underexplored in many languages, including Persian. The present study is thus an attempt to investigate the role of symbolism in the construction of IENs. Put differently, the current study is an attempt to identify the extent of culture-specificity in English and Persian IENs.

2. Some notes on metaphorical idioms

Metaphor is not a special use of language, but pervades all interaction (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Metaphor is a conceptual phenomenon with external manifestations. Similarly, idioms are motivated by our conceptual system (Kovecses, 2000, 2002).

Language is not only the carrier of information but also of culture. It is a mirror which reflects the society. Li (2007) states that metaphors are closely associated with a nation's history and culture. That is, culture plays a significant role in the construction of metaphors. Likewise, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) insist that it is only through metaphorical language that humans can truly convey and express themselves.

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The structure of language influences how speakers perform certain cognitive processes (Evans and Green, 2006; cf. Leavitt, 2011). On this view, concepts are highly dependent on the language we speak and therefore on our cultural background (Delschen and Fechner, 2002). Besides, there is established research proving evidence as to the mutual relationship between language and culture (Tochon, 2009).

In this study, culture is defined as a set of shared assumptions, meanings and understandings that exist in a given speech community. Idiomatic expressions, as a part of language, are closely associated with a nation's history, culture and customs.

3. Methodology and data

The present study is a qualitative endeavour in that the research question has been answered by comparing and contrasting IENs in English and Persian. In order to collect a substantial body of data, the following English dictionaries were examined: NTC's American Idioms Dictionary (Spears, 2000), Idioms Dictionary (Jeffcoat, online) and McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (Spears, 2006). The Persian IENs were collected from *Adaad dar Adabiyat-e shafahiy-e Mardom* (Jafarzadeh, 2007), *Farhang-e Estelahat-e Aamiyaneh* (Najafi, 1997), *Amsal-o Hekam-e Dehkhoda* (Dehkhoda, 1999), and *Jaygaah-e Adaad dar Farhang-e Mardom-e Iran* (Hassanzadeh, 2008).

During the first phase of the study, the IENs in the aforementioned dictionaries and research studies were picked out manually. Native speaker intuition was sought both in Persian and English to increase the validity of interpretations and the data was categorized thus:

- a) English IENs and their Persian numerical counterparts (E+Num vs. P+Num);
- b) English IENs and their Persian non-numerical counterparts (E+Num vs. P-Num);
- c) English culture-specific IENs (Culture-specific E+Num);
- d) Persian IENs and their English numerical counterparts (P+Num vs. E+Num);
- e) Persian IENs and their English non-numerical counterparts (P+Num vs. E-Num);
- f) Persian culture-specific IENs (culture-specific P+Num).

Next, the numbers were examined symbolically and with reference to their cultural background. Finally, the IENs were examined in the light of Lakoff and Johnson's Cognitive Model.

4. Analysis

Idioms are the reflection of a particular way of thinking and behaving. In what follows an attempt is made to cross-tabulate the data and explain the characteristics of some of the most interesting IENs in both Persian and English.

4.1. E+Num vs. P+Num

As our data shows, local symbolism plays a major role in the construction of idiomatic expressions but there are also some similarities between English and Persian. Most notably, *two* is the number of 'discord and conflict'. The following table shows English IENs and their Persian numerical counterparts:

Table 1: English IENs and their Persian numerical counterparts

IENs in English		Equivalentents in Persian	Meaning
1	A fox is not taken twice in the same snare	âdæme âgel æz je surâx do bâr gæzide nemiše (A wise man is not bitten twice from the same hole)	It is unwise to commit the same mistake twice.
2	Back to square one	bærgæšt sære xuneje ævæel (To return to the first square)	You have failed at something and now have to go back to the beginning.
3	In two minds	do del budæn (In two minds)	You have difficulty deciding what to do.
4	One cannot be in two places at the same time	bâ jek dæst nemitævân do hendevâne bærdâšt (One cannot hold two watermelons with one hand)	Two things cannot be done at a time.

5	One hand washes the other hand and together they wash the face	jek dæst sedâ nædâre (One hand does not make a sound)	You need company to accomplish things.
6	One swallow does not make a Summer	bâ jek gol bæhâr nemiše (One flower does not make a spring)	You should not assume that something is true just because you have seen one piece of evidence for it.
7	Two cats and a mouse, two wives in one house, two dogs and a bone , never agree in one	xâneji râ ke do kædbânust xâk tâ zânust (When there are two ladies in a house, your knees are in dust)	When two people are responsible for something, they never agree with each other.
8	Two-faced	do ru budæn (To be a two-faced person)	To be hypocritical.

4. 2. E+Num vs. P-Num

As our corpus shows, some English IENs seems not to have numerical equivalents in Persian. These IENs are shown in table 2 below:

Table 2: English IENs and their Persian non-numerical counterparts

IENs in English		Equivalents in Persian	Meaning
1	A stitch in time saves nine	<i>čo be moqe zæni bæxije ze pâregi ned3ât dehi bæqije</i> (If you stitch in time, you'll save the rest.)	Making small repairs now is better than making major repairs later.
2	Behind the eight ball	<i>tu hæčæl oftâdæn</i> (To be in dire straits)	To be in difficult situation.
3	In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is a king	<i>mæh dær šabe tire âftab æst</i> (In a dark night the moon is like the sun)	Said about a difficult situation in which someone with only a few skills is in a better position than those people who have none.
4	One-horse town	<i>šâhre mordeh</i> (The city of the dead)	A small, boring town where nothing much ever happens.
5	Talk nineteen to the dozen	<i>mesle mosæsæl hærf mizæne</i> (To talk like a machine gun)	To speak non-stop.
6	To be on cloud nine	<i>az xošhâli bâl dærâværdæn</i> (To grow wings)	To be happy.
7	To have two left feet	<i>dæsto pâ dær hæm pičidæn</i> (To have twisted hands and legs)	To be clumsy.

4. 3. Culture-bound E+Num

Table 3 features English IENs that seem not to have any idiomatic equivalents in Persian. These IENs are called “zero equivalents” (Gouws, 2002):

Table 3: Culture-bound IENs in English

English Idioms with Number		Meaning
1	At sixes and sevens	To be in a state of confusion.
2	Catch twenty-two	A frustrating situation where people need to do one thing before doing the second, and they cannot do the second before the first.
3	Dressed up to the nines	To wear glamorous clothes.
4	It takes two to tango	Something in which more than one person or other are paired in an inextricably-related and active manner, occasionally with negative connotations.
5	One over the eight	The final drink that renders someone drunk.

6	Three sheets to the wind	To be drunk.
7	To be in seventh heaven	To be happy.
8	To be scattered to the four winds	If a group of things or people are scattered to the four winds, they are sent to different places which are far away from each other.
9	To feel like a million dollars	To feel extremely good.

A very interesting example of culture-specificity is *dressed up to the nines*. According to Albert (2007), gold and silver are never classified as 100 but 99.99 percent pure. As such, the finest metals are known as 'the nines'. Therefore, *dressed up to the nines* means wearing the finest jewelry.

4. 4. P+Num vs. E+Num

Table 4 shows Persian IENs with their English counterparts. Human beings share such experiences as embodiment, death, and so on. Considering death, for example, Persian speakers use *mærg jek bâr šivæn jek bâr* (once death, once grief) and English speakers use *a man can only die once*:

Table 4: Persian IENs and their numerical idiomatic counterparts

Persian	English	Meaning
1 bâ jek gol bæhâr nemiše (One flower does not make a spring)	One swallow does not make a summer	Advising someone to err on the side of caution.
2 bærgæšt sære xuneje ævæl (He has returned to the first place)	Back to square one	You have failed at something and now have to go back to the beginning.
3 tâ se næše bâzi næše (It does not play up to three)	Third time is charm	The belief that the third time something is attempted is more likely to succeed than the previous two attempts.
4 tâ sæd sale dige hæm nemifæhmi (You will fail to understand even in 100 years from now)	Never in a million years	Absolutely never.
5 xâneji râ ke do kædbânust xâk tâ zânust (When there are two ladies in a house, two dogs and a bone, your knees are in dust)	Two cats and a mouse, two wives in one house, two dogs and a bone, never agree in one	When two people are doing the same thing, no agreement would be expected.
6 do del budæn (In two minds)	In two minds	If you are in two minds about something, you can't decide what to do.
7 do ru budæn (To be two-faced)	Two-faced	To be hypocritical.
8 se pælæšt âjæd o zæn zâjæd o mehmâne æziz âjæd (Three people come; the lady delivers the child; and the dear guest comes)	Three-ring circus	A situation characterized by confusing, engrossing, or amusing activity.
9 mærg jek bâr šivæn jek bâr (Once death, once grief)	A man dies only once	The fact of dying can only be experienced once. This is meant to console us with the thought that if death (i.e. a difficult situation) comes now it won't have to be experienced later.
10 jek dæst sedâ nædâre (One hand does not make a sound)	One hand washes the other hand and together they wash the face	Cooperation leads to accomplishment.

4. 5. P+Num vs. E-Num

Persian IENs and their non-numerical English counterparts are presented in table 5 below. As is shown in this table, some Persian IENs seem not have English numerical analogues:

Table 5: Persian IENs and their English non-numerical counterparts

Persian IENs	English counterparts	Meaning
1 âšpæz ke do tâ šod âš jā šur miše jā bi næmæk (Two chefs make the pottage sour or insipid)	Too many cooks spoil the broth	If too many people try to take charge at a task, the end product might be ruined.
2 ægær hæft doxtære kur dæšte bâšæd jek sâ?te hæme râ šohær midehæd (Even if he had seven blind girls, he would find a husband for each and every of them within an hour)	Box clever	To be smart.
3 dâr hæft âsemân jek setâre nædâræd (He does not have a star in all seven heavens)	He does not have a penny to bless himself with	To be poor.
4 šeš dânge hævâs râ d3æm? kærdæn (To act according to all the six parts of the brain)	Keep your eyes peeled	If you keep your eyes peeled, you stay alert or watchful.
5 sæd tâ çâqu besâze jekiš dæste nædâre (If he made one hundred knives, none of them would have a handle)	All talk and no trousers	Someone who is all talk and no trousers, talks about doing big, important things, but doesn't take any action.
6 hæft xæt budæn (To be a person with seven approaches/tricks)	Crooked as a dog's hind leg	A deceitful person.
7 hæmiše hæšteš gerove noheše (His eight is pawned for his nine)	Feel the pinch	To be poor.
8 jek dænde budæn (To have just one gear)	To be as stubborn as a mule	A Mulish person.
9 jeki be do kærdæn (To argue over one and two)	At each other's throats	To be in angry disagreement.

4. 6. Culture-bound P+Num

Some Persian IENs are based on ancient myths and cultural stereotypes. These idioms are presented in the following table:

Table 6: Culture-specific IENs in Persian

Persian IENs	Meaning
1 bæ?d æz si sâl noruz oftâd be šænbeh (After thirty years the New Year is celebrated on Saturday)	Refers to a situation when someone asks the other party to do something for him/her but they reject the request although they can respond to the request.
2 hæmiše do gorto nimeš bâgist (To demand two gulps and a half more than others)	Refers to a person who expects others to respect him more than usual.
3 ræfiqe şeš dâng budæn (To have all the six parts of a true friendship)	To be friendly and honest.
4 šeš mâhe be donjâ âmædæn (To be born after six months)	To be impatient.
5 šælvâre mærd ke do tâ šod be fekre zæne dovom mioftæd (If a man has two pants, he will be thinking about pursuing a bigamous relationship)	Used when someone becomes wealthier and decides to change the things he used to be happy with.
6 masnavije hæftâd mæn kâqæz æst (A book which has seven pounds of paper)	A piece of writing which is too long.
7 morq mæn jek pâ dâre (My chicken has one leg)	To insist on something.

8	hæft tâ kæfæn pusândæn (To spoil seven shrouds)	To be dead for many years.
9	hæft xâne rostæm râ tej kærdæn (To pass Rostam's' seven burdens)	To solve complicated problems.
10	hæft qælæm ârâješ kærdæn (To put on seven kinds of cosmetics)	To use a lot of make-up.
11	jek mæviz o čel gælændær (One raisin and forty dervishes)	A small amount of money that must be used for/with too many people.

As an example, *morqe mæn jek pâ dâre* (my chicken has one leg) is based on a Persian story. A merchant decided to change an official decision for his benefit. He gave a roasted chicken to his servant and asked him to give it to the judge. But the servant ate one of the legs. "If the judge asks me about the other leg, I will tell him that all the chickens in our locality have one leg" he said to himself. Having seen the chicken, the judge asked "where is the other leg?" He answered "Oh Sir! Our chickens have only one leg." The judge asked him to tell the truth but the servant repeated the same words. Finally, the judge gave up and said "he may be telling the truth and their chickens may have only one leg, indeed." Today, *morqe mæn jek pâ dâre* (my chicken has one leg) is used to refer to a person who insists on his opinion even if it violates the truth.

5. Examining the data according to Lakoff and Johnson's model

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), human conceptual system is metaphorically constructed. To wit, metaphors are cultural, conceptual tools. They are, therefore, a clue to the way we perceive the world and to the way we think. A metaphor is defined as a cross-domain mapping between the source and the target domain. The tenet of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) is that metaphors are experientially motivated (Gibbs, 2008). Conceptual metaphors are also known as cognitive metaphors; they have two parts: a source domain (SD) and a target domain (TD). The meaning of TD is understood via SD. TD is the linguistic proposition that speakers would like to address. In most cases, TD is an abstract idea. To make an abstract idea easily conceptualized, we need a concrete object. This concrete object is SD, which functions to help us better understand TD. Metaphorical mapping is the similarity between TD and SD. The relationship between them is in the form of TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN. Nevertheless, no significant relationship blossoms between SD and TD without underlying cultural assumptions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The following table tentatively shows how this model may be employed to explain IENs in Persian:

Table 7: IENs in Persian

QUANTITY AS SOURCE DOMAIN(SD)	EXPERIENTIAL TARGET DOMAIN(TD)
hæmiše hæšteš gerove noheše (His eight is pawned for his nine)	POVERTY; LOW INCOME
xâneji râ ke do kædbânust xâk tâ zânust (When there are two ladies in a house, your knees are in dust)	LACK OF UNITY
šeš mâhe be donjâ âmædæn (To be born after six months)	IMPATIENCE
ræfiqe šeš dâng budæn (To have all the six parts of a true friendship)	FRIENDLINESS
dâr hæft âsemân jek setâre nædâræd (He does not have a star in seven heavens)	POVERTY
gorbe hæft d3ân dâræd (A cat has seven lives)	STRENGTH
hæft tâ kæfæn pusândæn (To spoil seven shrouds)	DEATH

Similarly, the following table shows how this model may be used to explain IENs in English:

Table 8: IENs in English

QUANTITY AS SOURCE DOMAIN(SD)	EXPERIENTIAL TARGET DOMAIN(TD)
A stitch in time saves nine	IMMEDIATE ACTION
Two cats and a mouse, two wives in one house, two dogs and a bone, never agree in one	LACK OF UNITY/AGREEMENT
A cat has nine lives	STRENGTH
To be on cloud nine	HAPPINESS; EXCITEMENT
To be in seventh heaven	HAPPINESS

As previously noted, some IENs are highly culture-specific. Table 9 presents some of these expressions with reference to Lakoff and Johnson's model:

Table 9: Culture-bound IENS in Persian

QUANTITY AS SOURCE DOMAIN(SD)	EXPERIENTIAL TARGET DOMAIN(TD)
hæmiše do qorto nimeš bâgîst (To demand two gulps and a half more than others)	THANKLESSNESS
morq mæn jek pâ dâre (My chicken has one leg)	PERSISTANCE
hæft xæt budæn (To be a person with seven approaches/tricks)	DECEITFULLNESS
hæft xâne rostæm râ tej kærdæn (To pass Rostam's seven burdens)	DIFFICULTY

Finally, some culture-bound English IENs are presented in the following table:

Table 10: Culture-bound IENS in English

QUANTITY AS SOURCE DOMAIN(SD)	EXPERIENTIAL TARGET DOMAIN(TD)
Being dressed up in your nines	GLAMOROUSNESS
Catch twenty-two	FRUSTRATION
One over the eight	DRUNKNESS
The fifth column	SPIONAGE

6. Conclusion

Numbers are endowed with different cultural assumptions. As our data shows, some IENs, both in English and Persian, are associated with specific traditions, customs, beliefs and events. Accordingly, the present study shows that IENs cannot be understood without addressing cultural assumptions.

Given the widespread role of idiomatic expressions in successful communication, whether in listening, speaking, reading or writing, an increasing familiarity with these cultural nuances will definitely be of help to researchers, translators and second language learners. This study was a small step in this direction. Future research is definitely needed to shed more light on how IENs are formed and understood. Metaphors and idioms are also frequently encountered in learning contexts (Parvaresh, 2008); and, for this reason, they might reveal different orientations towards communication and learning.

Notes:

1. *Rostam* is the symbol of power, bravery, and resistance in Shaahnameh, a famous Persian/Iranian epic.

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