
**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IDIOMS WITH THE WORD “HAND” IN ENGLISH,
SPANISH AND ALBANIAN**

Lindita Skenderilindita.skenderi@unite.edu.mk**Suzana Ejupi**Suzana.ejupi@unite.edu.mk

Abstract: Idioms as phraseological expressions in English have always been a topic of interest for linguists, because they represent a rich world of words, which are always attractive to be analyzed. Every language has idioms and native speakers use them very normally. However, non-native speakers find them hard to understand and even harder to use them in their communication. The paper is focused on the idioms in English which have the word “hand” in them. Furthermore, those English idioms are compared to Spanish and Albanian idioms. The aim of the study is to see where those three languages have the same idioms, based on cultural translations, and where are they different. Most of the often-used idioms which include the word “hand” were found to be the same in Spanish and Albanian. Only few of them are completely different and don’t include the word “hand”, but they still convey the same message. The examples taken are compared based on full equivalence, partial equivalence and non equivalence meaning.

Keywords: idioms, languages, culture, native speakers, equivalence

INTRODUCTION

What are idioms?

In today's competitive world, languages are a key part of our modern culture, as they help us to expand our knowledge and interact with people from other parts of the world. Languages also help us learn from the traditions of other countries, establish friendships and do business. A very important and attractive part of every language are the phraseological expressions which embrace different expressions. However, in English language, people usually use the term idioms for these expressions which are constituted of different words but convey different meaning when used together. However, when it comes to the terms used for idioms, Spanish and Albanian are more similar. They both have the terms “expresiones fraseologicas” and “shprehje frazeologjike”, which in English would be mean phraseological expressions. In Spanish, the word “idioma” means “language” but they still use it sometimes as idiomatic expressions, which in Spanish are “expresiones idiomaticas” and in Albanian “shprehje idiomatike”. In order to keep the coherence of the paper, the word idiom will be used in the text below.

Language would not be fully functional and equally important if it lacked figurative linguistic aspect. In other words, the language would be poor in the lexical aspect if there were no idiomatic expressions, which develop communicative competence and reflect the culture of a nation. (Ejupi, 2016)

English language is a global language, and undoubtedly is a rich language when it comes to idioms, but so are Spanish and Albanian. It is interesting to compare these three languages in the aspect of idioms, because as languages, they are really different. All of these three languages are European ones, however, English is Germanic language, Spanish belongs in the Roman branch of languages and Albanian is a branch on itself. But what in fact are idioms?

Idioms are colorful mental pictures and are often used metaphorically to express something in a more vivid way. Related to their origin, the meaning comes from Greek, where “idioma” means “peculiarity”. (qtd. in Reijonen, 2006). Barragan states that the origin of idioms is “deeply rooted in the creative force of language and can be tracked in legends, songs, slang, a historical event or any cultural context that serves as matrix of new expressions that arise after melting the individual components in an only expression in such a way that the new meaning is absolutely different from that of the elements that constitute it or keeps just the meaning of one of the components that integrate the complete expression” (1). Idioms are a rich language heritage of every nation and when used at the opportune moment of a conversation can replace a long speech and have a great value expressive. Furthermore, they are complex chains consisting of two or more words. Its most relevant characteristics are its relative stability and its meaning unitary, traits that facilitate their learning, their memorization and their block playback. Most of them also have the quality of being languages, which allows us to establish different types of relationships between the meaning of the components and the overall meaning of the expression. (Sciutto, 2005)

Sometimes idioms can be considered fixed expressions used in a figurative way. Of course, each language has idioms that native speakers learn spontaneously and use them easily. However, when it comes to learning foreign languages, idioms are very hard to learn. They include words which are clear but the combination of words figuratively represents something else, while the meaning may not have anything to do with it. There are approximately around 25,000 idiomatic expressions in English and this makes it clear that for a non-native speakers it represents a tough battle to learn them all.

However, even native speakers find it hard to remember them all if their meaning is complicated. Teachers usually suggest that the only way to learn idioms is learning them by heart. Idioms are arbitrary, according to linguists, which mean that you cannot guess their meaning through the words they consist of. Thyab defines idioms as "...fixed expressions that are typically used in a figurative sense..." (106). According to her, the meaning of idiomatic expressions is usually made by coincidence and chance. Students are taught that there is no link between an idiom and its meaning and that idioms have to be learned by heart.

In Europe, over the course of the last two decades, the phraseology has changed from underdeveloped subdiscipline of lexicology to a consolidated and full-fledged discipline, in search of its definitive maturity. (Pastor and Morvay, 2000). This makes researchers and linguists more interested in these kinds of studies, which sometimes goes way back in history in order to get answers for the roots and origins of the expressions and idioms. It is not small even the number of comparative studies of idioms between two or more languages, which attract learners of those languages in many ways.

Idioms can be grouped in different ways and analyzed in different aspects but this paper focuses on comparing the meaning of a groups of idioms between three languages. Very often used idioms are those with body parts, such as heart, hand, foot etc. They have different meanings and some of them are very often used in English. "Idioms having parts of the human body as a referent are an illustration of the idea that the human alter-ego has risen above his primary meaning, that of man as an entity". (Butiurca, 2017).

If we study the semantic meaning of the word hand, we would normally say it is a body part. The definition given in the Cambridge dictionary stands as it follows:

"the part of the body at the end of the arm that is used for holding, moving, touching, and feeling things"¹⁷

The same meaning is given in the dictionary of Albanian and Spanish language. However, besides English, Albanian and Spanish language have quite a few idiomatic expressions with the word hand.

The idioms below are English idioms including the word hand:

- **All hands on deck**¹⁸ – this is used when the help of everyone is needed for something to be done.
Example: Your grandmother arrives tomorrow and I need all hands on deck to help me clean!
- **First-hand** – from your own experience or knowledge, rather than from somebody else.
Example: I know at firsthand what it is like to be poor; we always had very little money at home.
- **Hand in glove**¹⁹ - Very closely with someone or something, especially by design.
Example: Samantha is really hand in glove with Maria.
- **Hands down** – easily, unquestionably.
Example: She won the contest hands down
- **Be in good hands**²⁰ - Being handled or cared for by a competent party; in a position to be well cared for
Example: Don't worry. Your children are in good hands. Linda is an experienced baby-sitter.
- **Second hand**²¹ - from another person or source, not directly from personal experience or observation.
Example: I wasn't present at the meeting. I heard about it at second hand.
- **Give a hand** - To help someone with something.

¹⁷ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hand>

¹⁸ all hands on deck." [Farlex Dictionary of Idioms](https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/all+hands+on+deck). 2015. Farlex, Inc 2 Dec.

2018 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/all+hands+on+deck>

¹⁹ "hand and glove." [Farlex Dictionary of Idioms](https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/hand+and+glove). 2015. Farlex, Inc 2 Dec.

2018 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/hand+and+glove>

²⁰ "in good hands." [Farlex Dictionary of Idioms](https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/in+good+hands). 2015. Farlex, Inc 2 Dec.

2018 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/in+good+hands>

²¹ "second hand." [McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs](https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/second+hand). 2002. The McGraw-Hill

Companies, Inc. 2 Dec. 2018 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/second+hand>

Example: I hope someone will give me a hand with these bags; there's no way I'll make it to the eighth floor on my own.

- **Bite the hands that feed you** - Show ingratitude, turn against a benefactor.

Example: The college gave me a scholarship, so I shouldn't bite the hand that feeds me and criticize its hiring policies.

- **Hands are tied**²² - someone is not able to help or intervene.

Example: I'm sorry, I would love to approve your application, but my hands are tied by the regulations.

- **Out of hand**²³ – In an unruly or unmanageable state or manner; out of control.

Example: The situation definitely got out of hand after a few fans started throwing snowballs.

- **Have smth in your hands** - to have someone or something under control.

Example: I have the child well in hand now.

- **Heavy hand**²⁴ - Dealing with or treating people with a *heavy hand* means acting with discipline and severity, with little or no sensitivity.

Example: He ran the juvenile delinquent centre with a heavy hand.

- **the devil makes work for idle hands** - This expression means that people who do not have enough to do are often tempted to do something wrong.

Example: "It's not good for kids to have nothing to do at the week-end; the devil makes work for idle hands!"²⁵

- **take the law into your own hands**²⁶ - If, instead of calling the police, you act personally against someone who has done something wrong, you take the law into your own hands.

Example: "Instead of calling the police, he took the law into his own hands and confronted the youth who had stolen his son's scooter."

- **hand's turn**²⁷ - a stroke of work (informal)

- **to strike a palm against a palm** - clapping hands in amazement

Example: His mother stroke a palm against a palm after his performance.

Types of equivalence between idioms

When comparing between languages, idioms can be fully equivalent, partially or no equivalent. The paper has listed more fully equivalent than other idioms.

IDIOMS WITH SAME FUNCTION AND EXPRESSION

Few of the idioms have the same translations in Spanish and Albanian, while some others are a little bit differently formed. The following examples are the same or similar in some cases.

- a) **In good hands - en buenas manos – në duar të sigurta**

English: Your son is in good hands, the teacher is very good.

Spanish²⁸: Tu hijo es en buenas manos, la maestro es muy buena.

Albanian: Djali yt është në duar të sigurta, mësuesja është e mirë.

- b) **Give a hand - dar/echar una mano – zgjat dorën**

²² "hands are tied." McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs. 2002. The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 2 Dec. 2018 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/hands+are+tied>

²³ *For The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms:*

"out of hand." *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* by Christine Ammer. 2003, 1997. The Christine Ammer 1992 Trust 2 Dec. 2018 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/out+of+hand>

²⁴ www.learn-english-today.com

²⁵ the devil makes work for idle hands." *Farlex Dictionary of Idioms*. 2015. Farlex, Inc 2 Dec.

2018 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/the+devil+makes+work+for+idle+hands>

²⁶ www.learn-english-today.com

²⁷ Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (page 162)

²⁸ The examples in Spanish are taken from <https://www.spaneasylearning.com/es/expresiones-en-espanol-con-la-mano/>

English: Would you mind giving me a hand in packing?

Spanish: Puedes echarme una mano con los deberes, no entiendo lo que tengo que hacer.

Albanian: Unë po të zgjas dorën e nuk do të pendohesh.

c) Wash your hands of - lavarse las manos – laj duart nga

English: You can't start a fight and then just wash your hands of it

Spanish: Javi se lavó las manos y dijo que él no tenía nada que ver con el robo.

Albanian: E zgjodhën dhe u hoqën mënjatë, I lanë duart./ Laj duart nga kjo punë.

d) Second hand - de segunda mano – dorës së dytë

English: I bought a second hand bag. .

Albanian: Këtë veprimtari e shohin si të dorës së dytë.

Spanish: Como puedo comprar una coche de segunda mano?

e) Give them a hand and they'll take an arm - Dar la mano y cogerte el brazo – jepi dorën të mer krahun

This is used in situations where people misuse your generosity or help and they want more than what is given by you already.

f) Don't bite the hand that feeds you – muerdas la mano que te da comer – Kafsho dorën që të ushqen

English: *If you say bad things about the person who gives you a job, you bite the hand that feeds you.*

Spanish: *Los refugiados muerden la mano que los alimenta.*

Albanian: Njerëzit që kafshojnë dorën e atij që i ushqen, zakonisht lëpijnë kepecët e atyre që i godasin.

IDIOMS WITH PARTIAL EQUIVALENCE

a) Hands down - Con la mano en el corazón – dorën në zemër

English: Hands down, you are the best teacher.

Spanish: Vas guapísima, te lo digo con el corazón en la mano.

Albanian: Dorën në zemër, dukesh për mrekulli.

b) A Bird in the Hand is Worth Two in the Bush - Más vale pájaro en mano que ciento volando

While in Albanian, this is differently used. It stands like “ Më mire një vezë sot, se një pulë mot”, which means choosing an egg today rather than a chicken next year, in the sense of having something sure at the moment you need it, rather than something which you might not get it in the future.

c) Poner la mano en el fuego por alguien – Vë dorën në zjarr/prush

Spanish: estoy segura de que María no ha tenido la culpa, pongo la mano en el fuego por ella.

Albanian: Ajo është e pafajshme, vë dorën në zjarr për të.

IDIOMS WITH NO EQUIVALENCE

a) hand in glove – hacer algo mano a mano – bythë e brekë(vulgar) or mish e thua

English: John is really hand in glove with Sally.

Spanish: En la redacción del proyecto Ana y Amanda trabajaron mano a mano, hicieron el trabajo entre las dos.

Albanian: Janë mish e thua.

However, there is a more used version by the old people which is: Janë bythë e brekë me njerëzit e pushtetit. (Vulg).

b) Catch somebody red-handed - Pillar a alguien con las manos en la masa – me presh në duar

English: The police arrived as the burglar was leaving the house. He was caught red-handed.

Spanish: estás en mitad de un examen y empiezas a copiarte de un compañero. Justo en ese momento el profesor te mira y te descubre, él te dice: “Te he pillado con las manos en la masa”.

Albanian: Polici e kapi vjedhësin me presh në duar.

SUMMARY

The world of idioms is undoubtedly large and fascinating, especially when it comes to comparing between two or more languages. The study covered just the most used idioms with the word “hand”, in order to give readers an idea of how the colorful meanings of idioms are used in the three languages above, English, Spanish and Albanian. Idioms are more of a culture rather than a language thing, and as such they represent a complex world of everyday communication of non native speakers. There are limitations of the study due to short time and lack of materials. Further research is recommended to be made on idioms with colors, or other elements such as religion or business, which would be attractive and helpful for people who speak these three languages.

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