A LINGUOCULTURAL STUDY OF WATER-RELATED PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Annotation: Water occupies a striking place in English figurative language, recurring across idioms that encode danger, adaptability, hidden meaning, purity, and emotion. Grounded in the linguoculturological framework of Teliya, Maslova, and Vorobyov, this article treats phraseological units not as isolated curiosities but as compressed "texts of culture" carrying collective historical memory. Drawing on idiom dictionaries and comparative corpus-based scholarship, the study classifies a representative set of English water idioms — in hot water, still waters run deep, to go with the flow, water under the bridge, among others — into coherent semantic fields and traces their motivation to England's maritime and seafaring history. The analysis shows that English water phraseology is organized largely around the sea as both peril and opportunity, while certain images, such as depth signifying hidden meaning, reflect more universal, embodied cognition. Implications for translation and language teaching are discussed.

Keywords: linguoculturology, phraseological units, water idioms, English, cultural code, conceptual metaphor

Introduction

Every language keeps, alongside its grammar and vocabulary, a quieter archive: the store of fixed expressions through which a people has, over centuries, distilled its experience of the physical world into figures of speech. Water occupies an unusually large share of that archive in English. It is at once a substance one drinks, an obstacle one crosses, a force one fears, and a metaphor one reaches for

almost without noticing — for time that passes, emotion that overflows, truth that is hard to grasp, or trouble one has fallen into. A speaker who says a colleague is "in hot water," that an argument "doesn't hold water," or that a quiet friend's calm surface hides depths that "run deep" is not merely decorating speech; they are drawing, often without conscious awareness, on centuries of accumulated cultural experience with a single natural element.

This article addresses water-related phraseological units (PUs) in English, a language shaped historically by a long maritime, naval, and exploratory tradition. English speakers have, for the better part of a millennium, lived in close and often perilous relation to the sea: as an island nation whose trade, warfare, exploration, and eventual empire depended on ships and navigation, England developed a vocabulary of the sea that gradually seeped out of nautical registers into everyday figurative speech. The working hypothesis of this study is that this historical relationship to water — the sea as simultaneously a source of danger and a source of wealth, discovery, and opportunity — should be visible, in a fairly systematic way, in the imagery, connotation, and frequency of English water phraseology.

The aim of the article is threefold: first, to assemble and classify a representative corpus of English water-related phraseological units according to their dominant semantic fields; second, to examine, for each field, the structural and lexical means through which the figurative meaning is constructed; and third, to interpret these patterns linguoculturally — that is, to ask what each cluster of expressions reveals about the historical experience, worldview, and values of the community that produced and continues to use it. The analysis draws on the theoretical apparatus of linguoculturology developed in the works of V. N. Teliya, V. A. Maslova, and V. V. Vorobyov, supplemented by cognitive-linguistic research into conceptual metaphor (Kövecses) and by corpus-based and comparative scholarship on water idiom specifically.

Linguoculturology (lingvokulturologiya) emerged in the 1990s at the intersection of linguistics and cultural studies, largely through the work of the

Moscow phraseological school under the direction of V. N. Teliya, and was subsequently systematized as an independent academic discipline in the textbooks and monographs of V. A. Maslova and the theoretical work of V. V. Vorobyov. Teliya described the central task of linguoculturology as uncovering the mechanisms by which a linguistic sign comes to refer not only to an object in the world but to a concept of culture — that is, how language accumulates and transmits a people's collective self-understanding through the native speaker's own cultural and linguistic self-reflection (Teliya, 1996). For Teliya, phraseology in particular occupies a privileged position within this project, since idioms and set expressions are precisely the linguistic units in which literal meaning has been overlaid, sometimes for centuries, with a figurative and culturally motivated meaning that cannot be recovered by compositional analysis alone (Teliya, 1999).

Maslova, whose introductory textbook remains the most widely used point of entry into the field across the post-Soviet linguistic tradition, defines linguoculturology as a branch of linguistics situated at the intersection of linguistics and cultural studies, one that examines how material and spiritual culture is embodied in a living national language and manifests itself in ongoing linguistic processes (Maslova, 2001). Vorobyov's parallel model treats phraseological units as condensed "texts of culture": compact linguistic artifacts in which an entire narrative or evaluative stance toward some aspect of experience has been folded into a fixed, reproducible form (Vorobyov, 1997). A key analytical notion within this framework is the *cultural code* — the semantic layer through which a word or expression, beyond its literal denotation, comes to carry culturally loaded content. As Maslova's later work on cultural codes puts it, such codes form a picture of the world and stand at the centre of a nation's cultural space, at the same time serving as a means of structuring cultural knowledge (Maslova, 2016); the cultural code functions, in this sense, as a kind of container into which different linguistic units are filled with distinct cultural content (Kubryakova, 2004). The natural-phenomenal code — encompassing water, fire, earth, wind, and the like — is among the oldest and most

productive of these codes precisely because natural elements were, for most of human history, matters of daily survival rather than abstract curiosity.

Conceptual metaphor and the cognitive dimension

A complementary, cognitively oriented strand of research treats water phraseology through the lens of conceptual metaphor theory. Kövecses's extensive work on the metaphorical structuring of emotion concepts has shown that abstract, hard-to-visualize experiences such as anger, fear, pride, and love are habitually understood in English through the source domain of fluid contained under pressure — the generic metaphor *emotion is a fluid in a container*, realized in expressions such as *filled with rage*, *bursting with joy*, or *seething with resentment* (Kövecses, 2000). Although many of the specific lexical realizations of this metaphor do not use the word *water* itself, the underlying conceptual schema — an inner space in which an emotional substance rises, presses, and threatens to overflow or spill — draws directly on embodied experience of liquids, and water idioms proper (*to pour cold water on*, *waves of emotion*, *to be swept away*) can be seen as a lexically water-specific subset of this broader cognitive pattern.

This cognitive perspective is reinforced by recent corpus-based cross-linguistic research. A large-scale comparison of water idioms in Chinese and English found that languages tend to share certain target domains of water metaphor — such as power, thought, and emotion — because these are grounded in shared bodily experience and the universal physical properties of water, while other target domains prove culture-specific, reflecting distinct sociocultural factors rather than universal embodiment (Che et al., 2025). This dual finding — partial universality resting on shared embodied cognition, combined with culturally particular historical extensions — provides the analytical expectation against which the English material below is examined: some clusters of water idiom should reflect near-universal properties of water as a physical substance, while others should carry the specific imprint of English, and more particularly maritime English, history.

Methodology

The corpus assembled for this study (approximately 45–50 units) was compiled from established idiom dictionaries, descriptive linguistic accounts of English water idiom, and recent comparative and corpus-based scholarship, and organized according to dominant semantic field. The method combines componential semantic analysis — identifying the core semantic feature each unit encodes (danger, purity, abundance, emotion, adaptability, irreversibility of time, and so on) — with linguocultural interpretation, in which each semantic cluster is traced back, where plausible, to the historical or experiential context that most probably motivated it, with particular attention to England's maritime, naval, and exploratory history as a recurring explanatory factor. Where relevant, structural features (simile, metaphor, prepositional phrase, phrasal verb, proverb) and lexical range (the vocabulary items — *tide*, *stream*, *wave*, *flood*, *anchor*, *drown* — that extend the field beyond the core word *water*) are also noted, since these formal properties are themselves linguoculturally informative.

Water Phraseology in English: Semantic Fields and Cultural Motivation

1. Danger, trouble, and adversity

This is both the largest and the most cohesive semantic cluster in the corpus. It includes *to be in hot water* (to be in trouble, often through one's own actions), *to be in deep water* (to face a difficult or overwhelming situation, often one beyond one's competence), *to keep one's head above water* (to barely manage, especially financially), *to go down with the ship* (to remain loyal to a failing enterprise until its end), *to weather the storm* (to survive a period of hardship), *up the creek without a paddle* (to be in a hopeless situation with no means of escape), and *to be thrown in at the deep end* (to be given a difficult task without preparation). Several of these expressions can be traced directly to England's long maritime history: *to be in hot water* likely originates from the dangers of navigating stormy or scalding seas in older nautical usage, while *to pour oil on troubled waters* references the once-common seafaring practice of pouring oil onto a rough sea to calm its surface before the phrase acquired its present figurative sense of pacifying a conflict (Hoshimova

& Begizova, 2024). The sheer density and vividness of this cluster is itself a linguocultural fact of considerable weight: a seafaring nation whose commerce, warfare, and exploration depended for centuries on the unpredictability of open water encoded that unpredictability as a ready-made, endlessly transferable vocabulary for trouble of any kind, nautical or otherwise.

2. Adaptability, equilibrium, and pragmatic acceptance

A second, largely positively valenced cluster expresses acceptance, balance, or flexible self-adjustment to circumstance: *to go with the flow* (to accept things as they happen rather than resist them), *to test the waters* (to cautiously assess a situation before committing to it), *water finds its own level* (things naturally settle into their appropriate balance), and *to be in one's element* (used more broadly of any of the four classical elements, but historically resonant with water's capacity to be entirely at home in its own medium). Here the underlying image is not danger but water's fluid capacity to take the shape of any container or channel — a physical property that English figuratively transfers onto human flexibility, adaptability, and pragmatic acceptance of circumstance, in contrast to a rigid or brittle response to change.

3. Depth, concealment, and hidden character

Still waters run deep is the paradigm case in this cluster: the calm, undisturbed surface of deep water is read as a sign of hidden depth beneath, and the idiom is applied to quiet, unassuming people who conceal unexpected complexity, intelligence, or intensity of feeling. Related expressions include *to fish in troubled waters* (to seek personal advantage from confusion or disorder that affects others) and *uncharted waters* (an unfamiliar situation with no established precedent to guide one) — the latter a direct linguistic legacy of English exploration and cartographic history, when unknown seas on a navigational chart were literally left blank, unmapped, and therefore "uncharted." This cluster is, on the available cross-linguistic evidence, among the least culturally particular: because the visual opacity of water at depth is a universal physical property, available to any community with

access to lakes, rivers, or seas, it is unsurprising that comparable depth-as-concealment metaphors recur independently across unrelated languages, a pattern consistent with the broader finding that certain water metaphors are grounded in shared embodied experience rather than in any single culture's particular history (Che et al., 2025).

4. Purity, renewal, and vitality

Smaller than the danger-cluster but semantically important, this field includes *the water of life* (historically a calque of the Latin *aqua vitae*, subsequently narrowed in application to whisky and, more abstractly, extended to anything vital, restorative, or essential to survival) and *to hold water* (of an argument, plan, or explanation: to be sound and internally consistent — an image drawn from a vessel's physical capacity to contain liquid without leaking, transferred metaphorically onto the logical soundness of an argument that does not "leak" under scrutiny). The comparative smallness of this cluster relative to the danger-cluster is itself linguoculturally suggestive: where a culture whose historical relationship to water was primarily agricultural or irrigation-based might be expected to elaborate extensively on water as a source of purity and life, English — shaped instead by a maritime rather than an irrigation-dependent agrarian relationship to water — elaborates far more richly on water as a source of risk than as a source of sustenance.

5. Emotion and interpersonal relations

To be a wet blanket (someone whose presence dampens others' enjoyment or enthusiasm), *to pour cold water on* (to discourage or deflate an idea or plan), *to make waves* (to cause disruption, controversy, or draw unwanted attention), *to break the ice* (where ice, water's frozen counterpart, marks and then dissolves initial social tension), and *blood is thicker than water* (family loyalty is held to outweigh other social bonds) together form a cluster in which water's physical capacity to dampen, cool, thaw, or dilute becomes a vehicle for social and emotional meaning. This cluster connects naturally to the cognitive-linguistic finding, noted above, that emotion in English is habitually structured through fluid-based source domains

(Kövecses, 2000): where anger is conceptualized as a hot fluid under pressure, water in its cooling, dampening capacity provides the natural counter-image for anything that suppresses, discourages, or defuses emotional intensity in another person.

6. Time, memory, and irreversibility

Water under the bridge (a past event, often a past conflict or mistake, that is no longer significant and not worth continuing to worry about) treats the irreversible one-directional flow of a river beneath a fixed bridge as a metaphor for time that, once passed, cannot be reclaimed or altered. *Like water off a duck's back* (criticism, insult, or trouble that leaves no lasting impression on someone) draws on the concrete physical fact that a duck's oiled feathers repel water entirely, transferring that image of effortless repellence onto emotional resilience or indifference. Both expressions exploit water's characteristic motion — flowing forward, running off a surface — as a natural vehicle for abstractions about time's passage and the self's relative permeability to experience.

Structural and lexical observations

Structurally, English water idioms lean heavily on prepositional phrases in which *water* functions as the object of a preposition (*in hot water, in deep water, under the bridge*), on phrasal-verb constructions (*to pour oil on troubled waters, to pour cold water on*), and on similes and extended metaphors (*still waters run deep, like water off a duck's back*), with proverbial forms tending toward longer and more syntactically elaborated structures, as in *don't throw the baby out with the bathwater*. Lexically, the field draws on a wide vocabulary that extends well beyond the core word *water* itself — *tide, stream, flood, wave, drown, sink, anchor, storm* — much of it recognizably maritime or nautical in origin, a further linguistic trace of the seafaring culture that shaped so much of this figurative field over centuries of everyday and professional use.

Read together, these six semantic clusters reveal a coherent underlying cultural logic rather than a merely accidental accumulation of idioms. English water phraseology is organized predominantly around the sea as a site of both ***danger*** and

opportunity — an axis entirely consistent with the historical experience of an island trading and naval power whose wealth, security, and cultural self-image were built on maritime activity for centuries. The danger-cluster (hot water, deep water, weathering storms) reflects the sea as adversary, a force to be endured or survived; the exploration-cluster (uncharted waters, testing the waters) reflects the sea as a frontier of discovery, opportunity, and the unknown; and the emotion-cluster (wet blanket, cold water, water off a duck's back) shows how thoroughly this maritime vocabulary has been absorbed into the language of ordinary interpersonal life, far beyond any literal connection to ships, sailors, or the sea itself. The comparatively modest size of the purity-and-vitality cluster, set against the disproportionate weight of the danger cluster, is itself linguoculturally telling: it points to a culture whose defining historical relationship to water was one of risk and conquest rather than of irrigation and sustenance.

At the same time, not every pattern in the corpus can be reduced to specifically English historical experience. The recurring image of *depth* as a marker of hidden significance — in *still waters run deep* and, more obliquely, in *uncharted waters* — appears to rest on a more universal, embodied property of water (its visual opacity below the surface) rather than on anything specifically English or maritime, which is consistent with cross-linguistic findings that certain water metaphors recur across unrelated languages precisely because they are grounded in shared physical and bodily experience rather than in any single culture's particular history (Che et al., 2025). English water idiom, in other words, sits at the intersection of two distinct sources of motivation: a layer of universal, embodied cognition shared in principle by any language community with access to water, and a layer of culturally and historically specific elaboration that reflects, in this case, the very particular experience of a seafaring island nation.

Conclusion

The analysis confirms the study's working hypothesis: English water phraseology functions as a compressed cultural code, in Maslova's sense, that

continues to carry the linguistic residue of a specifically maritime historical experience into the ordinary speech of contemporary, often entirely landlocked, English speakers. Danger, adventure, exploration, and unpredictability — the defining features of a seafaring nation's relationship with open water — recur systematically across the semantic fields identified here, from expressions of trouble and adversity to expressions of discovery and adaptability, and even into the vocabulary of everyday emotional and interpersonal life. At the same time, certain clusters — above all the association of depth with hidden meaning — appear to draw on more universal, embodied properties of water rather than on culturally specific historical experience, suggesting that English water idiom sits at the intersection of shared human cognition and particular national history rather than being reducible to either factor alone. These findings carry practical implications for translation, where a phraseological unit's cultural motivation, and not merely its literal image, must guide the search for an adequate equivalent in another language, and for the teaching of English as a foreign language, where water idioms offer a natural and memorable point of entry for cultural commentary alongside ordinary lexical instruction. Further research might usefully extend this framework to other natural-phenomenon-based phraseological fields in English — wind, fire, earth — to test whether a comparably specific historical motivation can be traced in each case, and whether the same balance between universal embodied cognition and culturally particular elaboration recurs across those fields as it does here.

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