

The effect of intercultural communication in social media on figurative expressions usage

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Figurative expressions, such as idioms, are used orally and in writing in everyday language. An idiom is an expression used by itself or as a part of a sentence, and its meaning cannot be derived from the literal meaning of its constituents. Idioms can add an extra level of difficulty to the language learning process (either L1 or L2) because after understanding the literal meaning of each word, the learner has to make sense of the figurative meaning and how to use it correctly. From a pedagogical point of view, social media platforms appear to be influential with regard to learning literal and figurative meaning because they provide a context where this new language item is being used. This research investigates the role of social media platforms in figurative language learning. Different idioms are retrieved from social media platforms to show the effect of intercultural inclusion between speakers of different languages (English and Arabic). It is expected that watching a video containing figurative expressions or reading the comment section where an idiom is used can help the learners infer the meaning and know precisely how to use it and in what context. Moreover, new idioms are starting to be translated and borrowed to different languages due to L2 learners' exposure to this idiom in different contexts, which gives them an accurate depiction of it. The light is shed on the role of bilinguals and L2 learners who can work as an intercultural link between speakers of Arabic and English.

Keywords: *idioms, figurative meaning, literal meaning, borrowing, learning.*

1. Introduction

Misunderstanding in communication (either verbal or written) can result from taking someone's words literally, and this can result from needing more exposure to the other culture. When a group of words are used figuratively, the listener needs to build on previous knowledge to understand their meaning.

Speaking different languages makes a person a global citizen, and it is an essential marketable skill along with mastering the cultural competence of this

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second language. However, speaking a second language does not entail the ability to understand the cultural aspects of the second language (e.g. sense of humour). Sense of humour differs from one culture to another (regardless of the language), i.e., two native English speakers (one American and the other Australian) might misunderstand a culturally related joke. Even someone might get offended because of it. This is because learners need to be exposed to natural settings where the second language is spoken. Social media platforms can provide these settings where the speakers of this second language display different scenarios where certain expressions are being used.

It is essential to restate the difference between connotation and denotation. Connotation refers to the cultural or emotional association that a word or a phrase carries, while denotation concerns the literal meaning of the used expression. In traditional teaching settings for teaching a second/foreign language, instructors usually focus on the literal meaning of words and sentences and how they are used literally, which makes it difficult for the learners to immerse themselves in the culture of the language they are learning. This can create a barrier in communication when practising the language they are trying to learn.

Publishers of language teaching textbooks have started introducing different textbook series to teach language aspects "in context", such as grammar in context and vocabulary in context. Social media platforms such as TikTok also appear to provide a context where a figurative expression is used. This can help the second language learner to identify the appropriate usage of this expression.

This paper aims to inspect the written aspect of social media platforms (TikTok) to investigate the role these platforms have in figurative expression borrowing. The components that help in the success of the borrowing process and the borrowing models are also explored in this paper.

2. Theoretical background

In the 1930s, Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir worked on a series of publications that focused on the influence someone's language has on the way they think (Whorf 1956; Sapir 1965, 1985). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, proposes that the language one speaks influences how one thinks about reality. Boroditsky explains that our native language moulds how we think and view the world, including time and space (2011, 63). The notion that our perspective of the world is influenced by the language we speak might appear to be a controversial one. However, there are many examples from

different languages that our perspective of the word differs based on the language we speak.

Boroditsky (2011) remarks that verbs in different languages can convey different meanings. For example, the verb in Mian, a language spoken in Papua New Guinea, would indicate the time of the event (if it happened yesterday or in the recent past). However, in Indonesian, it would not indicate if it has already happened or is about to happen in the future. Also, speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre, a language spoken in Pormpuraaw, do not use spatial direction (left and right), but instead, they use cordial directions (north, south, etc.).

Moreover, some languages, such as Arabic and French, specify gender to all items, even the non-living ones (grammatical gender), which can be missing in other languages. The learner of Arabic will need to make sense of the idea that “the table” is feminine in Arabic. Different studies confirm that grammatical gender does affect the meaning, such as in the case of German and Spanish (Konishi 1993; Phillips and Boroditsky 2003). It has also been documented that the objects' descriptions differ based on their grammatical gender (feminine or masculine).

Translation from one language to the other can be challenging, as seen in the case of the difficulty in translation between Navaho and English due to the difference in linguistic structure between the languages. Hoijer explains that people in the Navaho verb system can only “participate” in action and not “initiate” them (1953), and to understand the Navaho linguistic structure, one has to understand the Navaho mind (Carroll 1956, 28).

The notion of pragmatic borrowing has been explored in the literature (Andersen 2014; Peterson 2017). This type of borrowing goes beyond the lexical borrowing of loanwords and explores the borrowing of discourse markers, interjections, expletives, vocatives, intonation, gestures, etc. According to Peterson (2017), lexical borrowing goes hand in hand with cultural borrowing. The borrowing process and its directionality take into account different linguistic and social factors, and these were explored previously in the literature (Matras 2009; Meyers-Scotton 2002; Sankoff 2001; Thomason 2001; Winford 2001). However, language contact cannot be easily characterised.

3. Hypothesis

Figurative expressions, such as idioms, can stand by themselves or be used as a part of a sentence. Idioms are usually outside the teachers' priority in second-language teaching classes. However, it is argued that learning another language and being exposed to how native speakers use it can widen language learners'

horizons and give them a different view of the world. This is due to the intercultural use of the same social media platforms. It is expected that L2 speakers will have a new perspective on certain aspects of life (such as expressing emotions and a sense of humour) because of the new notions and expressions borrowed from L1. Those L2 speakers will be able to express themselves differently when an expression is not original in the culture of L2 speakers.

From a pedagogical point of view, second language learners can acquire the meaning of new figurative expressions and learn how to use them when they are exposed to them in different contexts. Different publishers of language learning textbooks have introduced different series to teach language aspects "in context", such as grammar in context and vocabulary in context.

Second-language learners using different social media platforms can be exposed to different contexts where new figurative expressions are used. Social media platforms, such as TikTok, are expected to be influential in second language learning. It is expected that watching a video or reading the comment section where a figurative expression is used should help the learners infer the meaning and know precisely how to use it and in what context. Moreover, new figurative expressions are expected to be borrowed and translated into different languages due to the learners' exposure to them being used in different contexts, which gives them an accurate depiction of them.

From the points mentioned in the theoretical background section above, one can conclude that the borrowing process (either lexical or phrasal, literal or figurative) can pose some complications. Some of the meanings can get lost in translation due to languages' different perspectives.

4. Methodology

Monitoring the comment section in social media platforms such as TikTok shows different patterns in figurative expressions borrowing between languages. This research focuses on the written aspect of language production and investigates the new patterns of figurative expression borrowing that occur due to exposure to other languages.

After reviewing the comment section in one of the social media platforms (TikTok), newly borrowed expressions used by speakers of Arabic are highlighted and matched with the nearest English counterparts. Moreover, to gauge understanding of the English figurative expressions introduced in this paper, interviews were conducted with the following participants:

1. Speakers of Arabic that are familiar with different social media platforms - especially TikTok- to test the levels of their familiarity with the expressions analysed in this paper; and these participants can understand and speak English fluently.
2. Arabic speakers that are not using social media platforms extensively.
3. French speakers that can speak Arabic and English and are familiar with TikTok.

After retrieving examples and conducting interviews, different borrowing models are suggested, and examples are given for each model. Those methodology steps are shown in Figure 1.

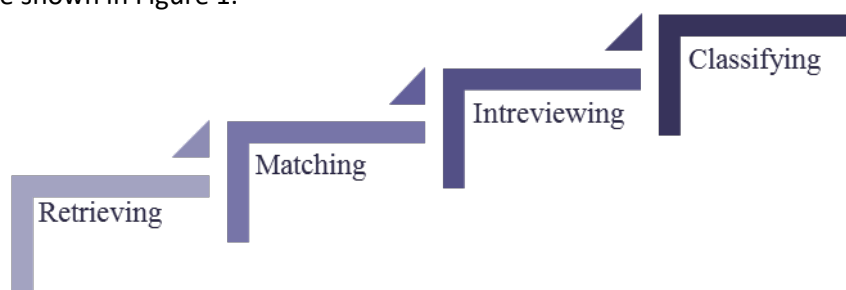


Figure 1. Methodology steps

5. Analysis and results

Borrowing expressions (either literal or figurative) from one language to another is based on the interaction between speakers of two languages. At least one of the speakers is bilingual (or speaks both languages fluently), and this speaker works as the intercultural link between the two cultures that speak different languages. The borrowing process entails either transferring a concept with the expression from language A (LA) to Language B (LB) (in this paper, LA being English and LB being Arabic) or just transferring the concept and creating a new expression in the target language.

The borrowing process model (in Figure 2) needs the following components:

1. Two languages at least (LA and LB), one of them being the source language and the other being the target language.
2. Native speakers of LA (native speakers of Arabic).
3. Bilinguals who are fluent in both languages or a native speaker of LB who speaks LA as a second language.

4. Native speakers of LB (native speakers of English).
5. A context where the LB speaker is introduced to LA figurative expressions and how they are being used, e.g., a social media platform.
6. A mode of communication, such as the comment section in TikTok.

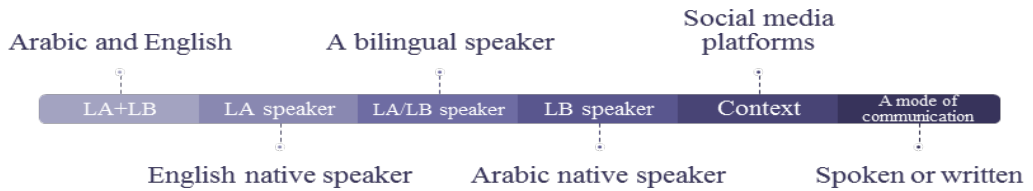


Figure 2. Model components

Based on the pattern noticed by speakers of Arabic in social media interactions, three different borrowing models can be suggested in Figure 3.

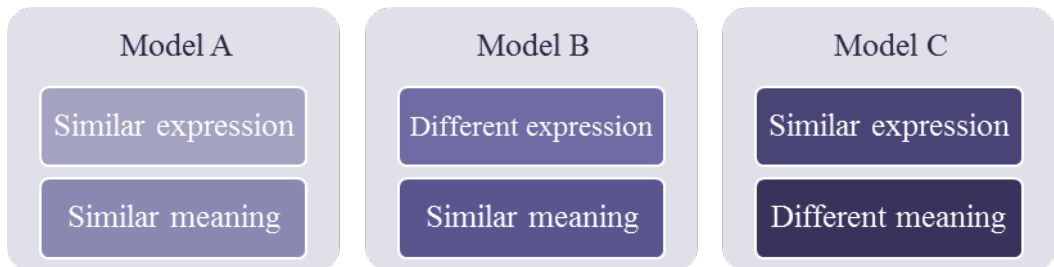


Figure 3. Borrowing models

The main reason for having different models for the borrowing process is that it takes time to complete, and each borrowed expression has its journey to move from the source to the target language. In addition, according to Haspelmath (2009), non-native speakers can impose properties of their native language into the source language. This also can affect the borrowing process and result in different borrowing process patterns, which can be classified into models.

Some newly borrowed figurative expressions have started to be used by Arabic Speakers. In the following sections (0, 0, and 0), examples are provided for each model. The expressions in the following tables under the "Arabic" column are retrieved from the comment section in TikTok and are written in Arabic.

5.1. Model A (Similar expression - Similar meaning)

When the Arabic expression is similar to the English one and conveys the same concept as the one in English, this borrowing falls under this model. In this case, it is expected that the intercultural link (the individuals who speak both languages) helped in the borrowing process while keeping the same meaning and translating these expressions literally to Arabic.

Table 1. Sadness/disappointment

English	Arabic
Broken heart	Broken heart

In Table 1, the expression “broken heart” and its derivations are used by Arabic speakers more often than before because they are exposed to the different contexts where this expression is being used. This gives them a clear depiction of how and when to use it in Arabic. In addition,

Table 2. Happiness

English	Arabic
You made my day	You made my day

The concept and expression “you made my day” has been recently borrowed by some Arabic speakers. However, the translation of the verb “made” in Arabic can be tricky because it conveys several meanings based on the use. The word used in Arabic as a translation of “made” is /sʻanaʻt/, which conveys the meaning of “manufacturing”, and this meaning is slightly different from the meaning conveyed in English.

Table 3. Sense of Humour

English	Arabic
He/She lives in 2050	He/She lives in 2050
He/She is living in the future	He/She is living in the future

These expressions are used as a comment on videos that depict an idea of “work smarter, not harder” or when someone in the video comes up with an intelligent way of doing something and beats everyone to a new technique of doing something (such as a cooking hack). The expressions in Table 3 have different variations (in both Arabic and English), but they are similar in concept, e.g., the year keeps changing from one context to the other but always refers to the future.

5.2. Model B (Different expression - Similar meaning)

As discussed above, speakers of different languages can have different perceptions of the world; and because of the intercultural exposure to social media, some of these concepts are being borrowed between languages. Borrowing figurative expressions in this model happen when the concept is foreign in the target language. Borrowing a foreign concept takes place first, and the expression is expected to eventually make its way to the target language.

Table 4. Emotions/sadness

English	Arabic
Who is cutting onions?	Something got in my eye

It has been noticed that many English native speakers used the comment in Table 4 in the comment section of videos with emotional content. Native English speakers use this expression (and similar ones) to pretend not to be emotional and blame “onions” for their tears. English speakers are trying to show that they are crying not because of the video but rather because of something else in their immediate environment (such as onions). Also, it is noticed that some English native speakers used the expression “I am not crying, you are”, which indicates the sense of not wanting to appear emotional. This concept is unfamiliar to many Arabic speakers, and interviews with Arabic speakers who spend little time on social media platforms confirm that (because they could not infer the meaning of these expressions).

An increasing number of Arabic and French speakers (that can speak and understand English and are familiar with this expression on social media platforms) have understood it and started using the concept without using the expression used in the source language. Many Arabic and French speakers have replaced the English expression in Table 4 with other ones, such as “something got in my eye”. There are several variations for “something got in my eye” in Arabic, where the speakers can list different objects, such as “a hair is in my eye” or even a bigger object, such as “the table went in my eye”. The bigger the object, the more

emotional the person is. French speakers (that speak English as their second language) use this expression in English, which is the final step before translating it to French and using it in their language. This indicates that the borrowing process of this phrase is in progress to make its way to the French language.

The concept of shifting the blame of crying to other objects to prevent looking like emotional beings is borrowed from English to Arabic and French. Expressions, such as "Who is cutting onions?" used in English, can be the primary source of "something got in my eye" and its different varieties in Arabic and French, which make this an example of model B (borrowing the concept only).

Table 5. Love and admiration

English	Arabic
It took my breath away	It took my heart/brain

The expression borrowed in Table 5 is recently emerging in Arabic, and it is mainly being used by social media users. This expression could be in its final stages before moving to model A (similar concept - similar expression).

Table 6. Sense of humour

English	Arabic
If you order (something) from Alibaba/ AliExpress	If you order (something) from Shein/ Noon

Expressions in Table 6 convey a sense of humour, and they are used to show that someone or something looks like the cheap version of something else, such as a celebrity look-alike or the knockoff version of an item. Websites such as Alibaba, AliExpress, Shein, and Noon can usually contain merchandise that is not original, and they can have low quality. However, Arabic speakers borrowed the concept but dropped "Alibaba" or "AliExpress" because these websites are not used by Arabic speakers as much as "Shein" and "Noon".

Table 7. Sense of humour

English	Arabic
Lucid dreams	Afternoon dreams

The concept of “lucid dreams” (used in English to convey a sense of chaos) is unfamiliar to Arabic speakers. Instead, the expression “afternoon dreams” is adopted by Arabic speakers, and it is used in the comment section in TikTok to convey the same concept as “lucid dreams”. Afternoon naps are known to have the most chaotic dreams; therefore, it is used by Arabic speakers to convey this concept.

Table 8. Conversation style

English	Arabic
Starting a story with ‘so’	Starting the story with ‘and’

It has also been noticed that conversation styles have been borrowed from English to Arabic. Starting the story with “so” in English conveys the meaning that the story you are telling has already started. In Arabic, “so” is replaced with “and” because “so” conveys the sense of formality.

5.3. Model C (Similar expression - Different meaning)

Borrowing is not always a successful process. It has been observed that, in some cases, only the expression makes its way to the target language, while the meaning gets lost in translation. In this case, someone might argue that the expressions are already available in Arabic, and the similarity between the expressions between languages is a mere coincidence.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the expression is the only part transferred, while the meaning got left behind. Speakers of different languages can have different translations of one phrase based on their native language, and Chase (1956) provided different examples for such cases. He explains that this can be because a speaker will view events differently because they view the world differently (p. viii).

Table 9. Different meanings

English	Arabic
Putting my foot down	Putting my foot

The expressions in Table 9 convey different meanings in both English and Arabic. In English, it conveys the meaning of “unyielding” or “stopping something”. On the

other hand, in Arabic, it conveys the meaning of "running away". Due to the lack of records, it is not easy, in this case, to establish a relationship between both languages, and having similar expressions could be just a matter of coincidence.

Table 10. Different meanings

English	Arabic
Blew my mind	Blew my mind

Expressions in Table 10 also behave in the same way as the ones in Table 9. Both expressions are used in English and Arabic but with different meanings. The expression "blew my mind" in English conveys the meaning of "surprise" or "finding something to be exciting or unusual". On the other hand, in Arabic, it is used when someone has a headache and feels it is going to "blow their mind".

6. Conclusion and future work

Speakers of multiple languages work as an intercultural link and have an essential role in the borrowing process of figurative expressions. Moreover, exposure to figurative expressions on social media platforms helps in accelerating the borrowing process.

It is essential to distinguish between the concept from the vessel it is contained in (e.g., the written expression). This is because each borrowing case falls under one of three models (i.e., Model A, Model B, and Model C). Each model differs from the others based on the concept they convey or the expression. If the expression and the concept in the target language are similar to the one in the source language, then this borrowing falls under the umbrella of Model A. If only the concept is transferred to the target language and expressed using different expressions, this would be an example of Model B. When the expression in the target and the source languages are similar, but the expressions convey different meanings in both languages, this would be an example of Model C. Therefore, one needs to pay attention to the different interpretations the target language speakers will have of the same expression in the source language.

As this is ongoing research, it is crucial to explore if there are other models or other elements vital to the models. It is also imperative to find expressions from different languages to support each model.

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