

Cross-Linguistic Analysis of Number-Based Idioms in English and Azerbaijani

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Abstract:

Number-based idioms (expressions containing numerals) are a rich site for exploring how language, cognition, and culture intersect. This study provides a comparative analysis of such idioms in English and Azerbaijani. We compile examples from idiom dictionaries and linguistic corpora, then analyze their structure, meaning, usage, and cultural background. Both languages employ numbers metaphorically to express quantity, time, emotions, and other concepts. For instance, English uses “a million and one” to mean an extremely large number, while Azerbaijani speakers say “yüz faiz” (100%) or “200 faiz” for absolute certainty. We highlight idioms that are structurally or semantically equivalent and those that are language-specific. The analysis shows that while many idioms share universal traits (e.g. use of metaphor), they also reflect unique cultural values (e.g. sacred numbers like 7 or 40 in Azerbaijani tradition). We discuss challenges in translating these idioms across languages, emphasizing that translators must often convey underlying meaning rather than literal numbers. This combination of theoretical and comparative methods reveals how numeric idioms encode cognitive metaphors and sociocultural beliefs, and it provides guidelines for translation and teaching.

Keywords:

Number idioms, cross-linguistic comparison, phraseology, cultural semantics, Azerbaijani and English linguistics

Introduction

Idiomatic phrases—fixed word combinations whose figurative meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words—are central to a language’s phraseology. In Azerbaijani linguistics, idioms (*frazologizmlər*) are defined as “stable word combinations that convey a figurative meaning”[7]. Across languages, idioms often exhibit *anthropocentrism* and rely on metaphorical imagery[3]. However, they also display language-specific traits shaped by culture and grammar[3]. Number-based idioms (idioms containing numerals) offer insight into how speakers conceptualize quantity, time, and abstract notions through numbers. For example, “*Cloud nine*” (Eng.) and “*göyün yeddinci qatında olmaq*” (AZ, literally “to be in the seventh sky”) both mean being extremely happy, but they use different numbers (9 vs. 7). Such differences suggest that numeric idioms are partly culturally grounded. According to Koça (2023), idioms containing numbers “shed light on

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the cultural and figurative nature of communication” by revealing how numbers carry symbolic associations[8]. As Gibbs and O’Brien (1990) argue, idiom meanings are often motivated by conceptual metaphors that speakers tacitly understand[4]. Thus, number idioms are not arbitrary: they reflect underlying cognitive mappings (e.g. **QUANTITY IS MAGNITUDE**).

Azerbaijani culture assigns special significance to certain numbers. Garibova (2004) notes that **3**, **7**, **40** (and to a lesser extent **52**) are *sacred* in Azerbaijani tradition[5]. For instance, the 3rd, 7th, and especially the 40th days after a person’s death are marked by commemorations[5]. Similarly, newborns and mothers remain in ritual seclusion for the first 40 days after birth[9]. The number **40** appears in idioms like “*qırx quldur*” (“forty thieves”)[10], linking to the famous *Ali Baba* folk tale. By contrast, English idioms often reflect Western cultural motifs: 7 appears as lucky (*seventh heaven*), 13 as unlucky, 2 as duality, etc. Such cultural grounding means that direct idiom equivalents are not guaranteed. As Sadigova (2024) observes, English and Azerbaijani idioms share universal characteristics (e.g. reliance on metaphor) but also have unique cultural and structural features[3].

This study examines number-based idioms in English and Azerbaijani from a comparative perspective. We combine phraseological theory with cognitive semantics to analyze *how* numbers function metaphorically in both languages. Key questions include: **What semantic fields do these idioms cover? How do their grammatical structures differ? Which idioms are equivalent in meaning, and which are not? What cultural meanings do they carry?** We also address translation issues: numeric idioms often resist literal translation, requiring interpretation. By systematically comparing examples (from dictionaries, corpora, and previous studies[11][12]), we aim to reveal both common patterns and language-specific nuances.

Methods

The research employs a **comparative-descriptive** methodology. Data were collected from English and Azerbaijani phraseological sources: idiom dictionaries (e.g. English idiom corpora, Azerbaijani phraseology references) and bilingual dictionaries. We also inspected linguistic corpora and published studies to gather authentic examples (e.g. Sadigova 2023, Koça 2023, Garibova 2004). Following Sadigova (2024), a **comparative-historical** approach was adopted[13]. This involved:

- **Data compilation:** Extracting idioms containing numerals (cardinal, ordinal, fractional, complex numbers) from monolingual and bilingual sources. For English, resources included corpora and idiom lists (such as those cited by Sadigova 2023[14]). For Azerbaijani, we used sociolinguistic descriptions[5][12] and local idiom collections.
- **Classification:** Organizing the idioms by structural type (e.g. simple cardinal, compound like *twenty-four seven*, ordinal) and semantic field (e.g. quantity, time, quality). This echoes the thematic grouping used by Sadigova (2024) in her comparative analysis[11].

- **Analysis:** Conducting a semantic and syntactic analysis of each idiom. We examined their literal structure (word order, grammatical construction) and figurative meaning. Where possible, we identified conceptual metaphors (after Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990) that underlie these idioms.
- **Cross-linguistic comparison:** For each idiom or semantic category, we compared English and Azerbaijani examples. We noted cases where idioms are equivalent in meaning (possibly with different form or number), versus cases where no direct equivalent exists. Sadigova (2024) similarly compares structures across languages[3].

This qualitative analysis was supplemented by examples from native speaker intuitions and bilingual dictionaries (e.g. Valiyeva 2010) to ensure accurate meaning. Throughout, we considered sociocultural context (per Garibova 2004)[5]. Findings are reported as descriptive observations with supporting examples.

Results and Analysis

English Number Idioms

English idioms featuring numbers cover diverse meanings. For example, idioms of **quantity and rarity** include “*a million and one*” (meaning an enormous, almost uncountable number)[1], “*one in a million*” (very unique), and “*a dime a dozen*” (very common, literally worth only a dime[11]). **Time and frequency** are often conveyed with numbers: “*twenty-four seven*” (written 24/7) means all the time[1], and “*ninety-nine out of a hundred*” (or “*nine times out of ten*”) means almost always[15]. **Difficulty or significance** can involve numbers: the “*\$64,000 question*” refers to a very important or difficult question[16], derived from a mid-20th-century TV quiz show offering \$64,000 prizes.

Other English idioms use numbers metaphorically in human contexts: “*two heads are better than one*” means collaboration improves outcomes[11], “*to have two left feet*” (or *hands*) means to be clumsy, and “*to bear two faces under one hood*” means to be duplicitous[11]. Phrases like “*first-hand*” or “*second nature*” include ordinals with specific senses (e.g. “*first-hand*” means direct experience[11]). Several idioms express states or emotions: “*on cloud nine*” (extremely happy) or “*in seventh heaven*” both denote euphoria (using different numbers). Numerical idioms for spatial/quantitative metaphors include “*at sixes and sevens*” (completely confused) and “*back to square one*” (starting over), the latter originally referring to board games and implying reset. Some idioms use specific numbers as symbols (e.g., “*catch-22*” for a no-win situation, from Joseph Heller’s novel).

A concise list from Sadigova (2024) illustrates this mix: English examples include “**two heads are better than one**”, “**have two left hands**”, “**four eyes see more than two**”, “**bear two faces under one hood**”[11], as well as complex forms like “**a million and one**”, “**twenty-four seven**”, and “**\$64,000 question**”[1][16]. These idioms vary in grammatical structure: some are full clauses

(*two heads are better than one*), others are noun phrases (*the million-and-one ideas*), and some are fixed expressions with unusual syntax (*three is a crowd*).

Azerbaijani Number Idioms

Azerbaijani idioms also employ numbers in figurative ways, but with some distinct patterns. Culturally significant numbers appear frequently. For example, **40** (forty) occurs in “*qırx quldur*” (“forty thieves”)[10], referencing the *Ali Baba* tale; and the concept of “40 days” is culturally important (see Introduction). Small numbers like **2** and **3** often convey quantity or relationship. One common expression is “*iki qəpiyə dəyməyən*” (“not worth two kopeks”)[17] to indicate utter worthlessness or low quality (analogous to English “not worth a penny”). In a similar vein, “*iki addım aralı*” (“two steps away”) means very close[18].

Other idioms: “*iki əl quş tutub, birinə durmaq*” (lit. “to catch two birds and hold onto one”) has a sense like “*kill two birds with one stone*” (though this exact phrase is more common in English); “*iki üzlü*” (“two-faced”) = hypocritical. Some idioms use larger numbers for emphasis. Garibova (2004) reports Azeris exaggerate time: someone might say “*iki il gözlədim – amma yüyəcə min ildə görmədim*” (“I waited two years – I haven’t seen him in a thousand years”), hyperbolically using *yüz il* (“hundred years”) or *min il* (“thousand years”) to mean a very long time[12]. Confirming this, speakers use “*yüz faiz*” (100%) or “*200 faiz*” to express certainty[2]. The latter (200%) is a peculiarly emphatic idiom of over-certainty.

Sadigova’s (2024) comparative list provides examples of Azerbaijani number idioms: “**birdə alacağı yox**” (“no remaining debt [even once]”), “**beşdə verəcəyi**” (“five left to give”), “**yeddi arxa dönəni**” (“seven [generations] back-turned”), “**bir deyənin olunca, min yeyənin olsun**” (“let there be one to say it and a thousand to eat [your words]”), and “**qırx quldur**” (“forty thieves”)[10]. These are hard to translate literally but serve various meanings: for instance, “*bir deyənin olunca, min yeyənin olsun*” suggests having one to advise you but a thousand to listen (akin to having many supporters). Generally, Azerbaijani idioms more often omit articles (e.g. *iki qəpiyə* vs. Eng. “two kopeks”) and allow flexible word order[19].

Structure and Grammar

Structural differences between English and Azerbaijani idioms are apparent. English idioms frequently include articles (*a, the*) and fixed word order (Subject–Verb–Object). Azerbaijani, with a different syntax, often places the verb at the end of the clause and omits articles. For example, Sadigova (2024) notes English idioms often use prepositions or articles (e.g. “*to pay through the nose*”), whereas Azerbaijani idiomatic phrases typically invert the order or drop such elements[19]. Moreover, English idioms may be verb phrases or clauses (e.g. “*to have two left hands*”), whereas many Azerbaijani idioms are compact verbless phrases or use participles. In addition, English can form idioms with complex numbers and symbols (as in “\$64,000” or “24/7”), which have no direct Azerbaijani counterpart form.

Morphologically, English uses combinations like ordinal numbers (*first-hand*) or quantifiers (*twofold*) in idioms, while Azerbaijani often uses simple cardinals with postpositions. For instance, “*iki addım*” (two-step) or “*iki metrlik dodaq*” (two-meter tongue) use numeric phrases as modifiers. This difference affects translation: sometimes an English idiom’s number appears in Azerbaijani in a completely different structure.

Semantic Categories of Number Idioms

Both languages exploit similar semantic themes, though with language-specific idioms. Key categories include:

- **Quantity/Amount:** Intensifiers and hyperboles. *A million and one* (Eng) meaning an enormous number[1]; *a hundred years* (AZ) meaning a very long time[12]. Similarly, *a dime a dozen* (commonplace) has no fixed Azeri number-idiom equivalent but could be paraphrased.
- **Proximity and Relative Measure:** Using small numbers to indicate closeness or modesty. Azerbaijani “*iki addım aralı*” (“two steps away”) means very near[18]. English similarly says “*two shakes of a lamb’s tail*” or “*in two ticks*” for “very soon”, though these are colloquial.
- **Low Value/Worthlessness:** Both languages use low numbers in this sense. AZ “*iki qəpiyə dəyməyən*” (“not worth two kopeks”)[17] parallels Eng. “*not worth a penny*”.
- **Exaggeration and Rarity:** High numbers express magnitude or exaggeration. English “*99 out of 100*” (almost always)[15] and “*a million and one*” (countless)[1]. Azerbaijani uses “*yüz faiz*” and “*200 faiz*” to intensify certainty[2].
- **Certainty vs. Doubt:** Interesting contrasts emerge: Azerbaijani saying “*200 faiz*” (200%) has no English idiomatic counterpart beyond perhaps “100%”. This reflects a cultural penchant for numerical hyperbole in expressing assurance.
- **Ordinal Positions:** Some idioms refer to sequence. English “*eleventh hour*” means the last moment; Azerbaijani “*axırncı dəqiqə*” (last minute) conveys the same idea, though without an ordinal number in AZ. This shows that one language may use an ordinal number to encode urgency while the other uses a non-numeric phrase.

Examples of core idioms:

- *English: Two heads are better than one* (cooperation)[11], *Two is company, three’s a crowd* (preferring pair over trio), *Catch-22* (impossible dilemma), *Six feet under* (dead), *Dress to the nines* (very fashionably), *Feel like a million dollars* (feeling very well).
 - *Azerbaijani: İki baş yaxşı, bir baş pis* (literally “two heads good, one head bad”, meaning two cooperate better than one); *Üçüncü adam artıqdır* (lit. “the third person is excessive”, equivalent to Eng. “third wheel”); *Üçdən üçüncü dəfə uğurlu* (“third time lucky”) – see below.

Discussion

Equivalence and Non-Equivalence

Our comparison reveals both equivalent and non-equivalent idioms. Some English idioms have Azerbaijani counterparts with similar meaning, though sometimes different wording. For example, English “*two is company, three is a crowd*” matches AZ “*üçüncü adam artıqdır*” (lit. “the third person is too many”); both express discomfort when a couple becomes a trio. Similarly, the concept of doing double duty is present: Eng. “*kill two birds with one stone*” corresponds to Azerbaijani “*bir daşla iki quş vurmaq*” (identical wording, common idiom in Turkic languages). In these cases, the numbers (two, three) align across languages, showing a shared metaphor of quantity in social situations.

However, many idioms have only partial equivalence or none. Consider “*at the eleventh hour*” (Eng.) meaning “at the last moment” vs. AZ “*son anda*” (“at the last moment”); the AZ idiom lacks a number entirely (the numeric *eleven* is dropped) although both convey urgency. Cloud metaphors differ: Eng. “*on cloud nine*” and AZ “*göyün yeddinci qatında olmaq*” both mean ecstatic joy, but the numbers (9 vs. 7) differ, reflecting different cultural associations (AZ tradition uses 7 for heavenly layers). Translators must therefore focus on meaning rather than literal numbers. We see that Sadigova (2024) emphasizes idioms share universal conceptual metaphors but unique cultural “traps”[3].

Some idioms are culturally bound. English “*dress to the nines*” (dress very fashionably) has no obvious Azerbaijani equivalent; one must say something like “*çox dəbli paltar geyinmək*” (wear very fashionable clothes) instead of a number-based phrase. Conversely, AZ “*200 faiz*” has no English parallel. Unique numeric idioms also exist: for instance, AZ “*üçdən üçüncü dəfə uğurlu*” (lit. “the third time out of three is lucky”) for “third time lucky” has no direct English counterpart using that structure (English simply says “third time lucky”).

Cognitive and Cultural Implications

The idioms reflect underlying cognitive metaphors. Gibbs & O’Brien (1990) argue idioms draw on conceptual metaphors in speakers’ minds[4]. Numeric idioms often extend metaphors of quantity, value, or time. For example, equating time with spatial distance yields “*a day is long enough to live*” or “*two seconds away*” metaphorical uses of number. The use of “*two*” frequently symbolizes duality or completeness (*two heads, two hands*), while “*three*” often denotes completion or an “outsider” (the proverbial crowd of three). Numbers like 100 or 1,000 function as “goose bumps” to emphasize totality or exaggeration.

Cultural numerology also guides these metaphors. As Moldabekova & Akböpe (2025) note for Turkic cultures, numbers 3, 7, 9, 40 carry deep folklore meanings[6]. Azerbaijani idioms clearly show 40’s significance (mourning and birth customs)[5]. Western culture views 7 as lucky and 13 as unlucky; English idioms echo that (7th heaven, Friday the 13th) while Azerbaijani borrows 13-as-unlucky from Russian[20]. These cultural models make certain numbers feel “right” in idioms.

Thus, an English speaker and an Azerbaijani speaker might both use a heaven metaphor for bliss, but pick different numbers (9 vs. 7) aligned with cultural tradition.

Sadigova (2024) observes that idioms are inherently anthropocentric and metaphorical[3]. Number idioms exemplify this: they map human experiences (happiness, confusion, cooperation) onto number concepts. Translating them thus involves mapping the same experience in target culture. For example, if translating “*cloud nine*”, an Azerbaijani translator will use “*yeddinci qat*” to evoke the concept of bliss. Recognizing the cognitive motivation behind idioms (e.g. MORE IS UP, DIFFICULTIES ARE CHAINS, etc.) helps in finding an appropriate target-language expression[4].

Translation Challenges

Translators face several challenges with number idioms. Literal translation of the numeral often fails: “*on cloud nine*” literally as “*buludun üzərində doqquz*” would confuse Azerbaijani readers. Instead, one must convey the idiomatic meaning (e.g. “*göyün yeddinci qatında olmaq*”[21], meaning “be in seventh heaven”). Sadigova emphasizes focusing on functional equivalence over formal equivalence[3]. In practice, a translator must detect if an idiom exists in the target language (or a close variant) and use it. When no equivalent idiom exists, paraphrase is needed: e.g., English “*wearing the pants*” (to be head of household) is said in AZ as “*ayağının üstündə durmaq*” (to stand on one’s own feet), a completely different metaphorical structure.

Even when an idiom has an equivalent form, the numerical component may differ. As we saw, both languages have “two heads are better than one,” but some idioms swap numbers: Eng. “*to feel like a million dollars*” (extremely well) might be translated conceptually in AZ as “*özünü ulduz kimi hiss etmək*” (feel like a star), avoiding the number altogether. Numbers can also mislead: AZ speakers say “*üçüncü dəfə deyib uğurlu*” (“third time lucky”) which English is comfortable with, but English’s “*six of one, half a dozen of another*” (meaning two things are the same) requires a different phrasing in AZ (“*ikisi də bir yin qırağıdır*” roughly “both sides of the same cloth”[22]). If a direct numeric translation were attempted, it would sound unnatural.

Thus, idiom translation relies on understanding the **conceptual motivation** of each phrase. Recognizing that idioms like “*two kopeks*” and “*a penny*” both index low value allows a translator to match meanings even if numbers differ[17]. Non-equivalent idioms require recreation of the idea: an English idiom with no AZ counterpart is translated by explaining the situation. As Sadigova notes, comparative phraseology must account for both universal metaphorical reasoning and unique linguistic expression[3]. In short, translators must identify the intended meaning behind the numeric idiom and choose a culturally and idiomatically natural rendering in the other language.

Conclusion

Number-based idioms in English and Azerbaijani reveal how humans use simple numerals to capture complex ideas. This cross-linguistic analysis has shown that both languages use numbers metaphorically across similar semantic domains (e.g. quantity, time, value), reflecting shared cognitive patterns. However, the *specific* numbers and constructions chosen are influenced by cultural beliefs and linguistic structure. English idioms frequently leverage culturally resonant numbers (7, 12, 100, etc.), while Azerbaijani idioms highlight local motifs (e.g. **40** for ritual periods, **200%** for certainty). These findings underscore that idioms, even when sharing an underlying metaphor, are often language-unique in form[3][11].

From a translation and pedagogical perspective, awareness of these differences is crucial. Translators should translate the *meaning* behind numeric idioms rather than the digits themselves. For instance, conveying the sentiment of “*one in a million*” may not require mentioning “million” in AZ if another idiom or phrase better fits culturally. Similarly, learners of English must grasp that “*cloud nine*” and “*seventh heaven*” mean the same feeling though the number differs.

In sum, number idioms act as windows into both cognition and culture. They demonstrate how languages converge in using numbers to index concepts (as cognitive shortcuts) yet diverge in their cultural references and grammatical encoding. Future research might extend this comparison to other Turkic languages or explore how number idioms evolve with cultural change. For now, our analysis affirms that a deep understanding of idiomatic numerals requires blending semantic theory, cultural knowledge, and careful cross-linguistic comparison (Sadigova, 2024)[3].

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