

MEANING BEYOND WORDS: A SEMANTIC LOOK AT IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN *EMPIRE STATE OF MIND*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the semantic and cultural dimensions of idiomatic expressions in the song *Empire State of Mind* by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys. Employing a qualitative research design, the analysis draws upon Adam Makkai's typology of idioms and integrates perspectives from cultural linguistics and semantic theory. The research identifies various idiom types—such as phrasal verbs, tournures, and figurative noun phrases—and examines their contextual meanings within the lyrical narrative. Findings reveal that these idiomatic expressions not only enhance the song's poetic texture but also serve as symbolic vehicles for expressing cultural identity, urban resilience, and the ideals of the American Dream, particularly through the lens of New York City. The study highlights how idioms function beyond linguistic ornamentation, offering rich insights into the socio-cultural imagination embedded in popular music. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how language, culture, and music intersect, and presents implications for both language learning and cultural analysis in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: idiomatic expressions, semantics, cultural linguistics, popular music, *Empire State of Mind*, American Dream, New York City

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a system of rules and structures; it is a living repository of culture, history, and identity. Among its many elements, idiomatic expressions stand out as particularly rich linguistic artifacts. Often deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of a community, idioms convey meanings that transcend their literal definitions, offering insights into shared experiences, values, and worldviews. As such,

studying idiomatic expressions provides a window into the cultural nuances and semantic depth of a language.

Popular music, as a form of mass communication and artistic expression, frequently incorporates idioms to reflect the realities, emotions, and identities of the communities it represents. Lyrics, especially in genres such as hip-hop and R&B, often serve as vehicles for storytelling, resistance, pride, and cultural memory. One exemplary work in this regard is *Empire State of Mind* by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys. Released in 2009, the song became an anthem for New York City, weaving together themes of ambition, struggle, and triumph through a rich tapestry of lyrical expression. Its use of idiomatic language adds texture and depth to the narrative, encapsulating both personal and collective experiences within the urban landscape.

This study aims to analyze the idiomatic expressions in *Empire State of Mind* through a semantic and cultural lens. Using Adam Makkai's classification of idioms, the research identifies and categorizes the idioms present in the lyrics, then interprets their meanings in the context of New York City's cultural milieu. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What types of idiomatic expressions are used in the song *Empire State of Mind*? and (2) What are the semantic and cultural meanings conveyed through these idioms?

By exploring the intersection of language, music, and culture, this research not only highlights the communicative power of idioms but also contributes to a deeper understanding of how linguistic creativity reflects and shapes cultural identity in popular discourse.

Idiomatic expressions are a unique and rich component of language that reflect the depth of cultural knowledge embedded in communication. As Weinreich (1969) asserts, the study of idioms remains "one of the most overlooked and under-explored areas in modern linguistics" despite their importance in daily communication. Idioms carry meanings that are often figurative, and their interpretation requires more than just linguistic competence – it demands cultural understanding.

Culture plays a critical role in shaping idiomatic language. Each idiom reflects the social habits, historical experiences, beliefs, and values of the community it originates from. As Keraf (2006) explains, "language style relates to how individuals convey messages," often infused with culturally specific nuances that go beyond literal

meanings. In essence, idioms serve as a mirror to a society's worldview, environment, and identity.

In today's globalized world, English continues to evolve as a dominant international language, serving as a primary or secondary language for millions worldwide. Within English, idioms are abundant and heavily used in literature, daily speech, media, and especially music. Songs, as a form of artistic and emotional expression, often incorporate idioms to convey mood, imagery, and deeper meaning. McCarthy and O'Dell (2010) note that idioms "make language more colorful and can express ideas more vividly."

The song *Empire State of Mind* by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys, which celebrates the vibrancy and complexity of New York City, is a prime example. Phrases such as "concrete jungle" and "big lights will inspire you" are not only idiomatic but also culturally loaded, encapsulating the grit, glamour, and ambition associated with the American metropolis.

From an educational perspective, teaching idioms can significantly enhance language acquisition. Students who master idiomatic expressions not only expand their vocabulary but also improve fluency and comprehension, allowing them to sound more natural in conversation. As stated in the thesis, "mastering idioms not only enriches vocabulary but also enhances fluency in speaking and writing, making one's English sound more natural and native-like".

Given these reasons, the current study seeks to examine the types and meanings of idiomatic expressions found in *Empire State of Mind*, utilizing Adam Makkai's theory of idiom classification, particularly the semantic and lexemic categories. This study also incorporates McCarthy's theoretical framework, highlighting the practical and pedagogical implications of idiom study in English language learning.

By exploring how idioms are used in popular music, this research underscores their role not just as linguistic tools, but as cultural artifacts that can bridge understanding and bring language learners closer to the soul of English-speaking cultures.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the idiomatic expressions found in the song *Empire State of Mind* by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys. The

qualitative method is appropriate for this research because it focuses on interpreting meanings, particularly the semantic and cultural dimensions embedded in the idiomatic language of the song. As suggested by Moleong (2007), qualitative research is concerned with understanding phenomena in their natural settings, and language—especially as it appears in artistic texts such as music—requires deep contextual and interpretive analysis rather than statistical measurement.

The primary source of data in this study is the official lyrics of *Empire State of Mind*, which were retrieved from a verified version on Genius.com and cross-checked with other trusted sources to ensure textual accuracy. This song was selected due to its prominent use of idioms and culturally rich references to New York City, offering a meaningful site for analysis.

Data was collected through document analysis. The researcher closely examined the lyrics, reading them multiple times to identify idiomatic expressions. The idioms were selected based on specific criteria: they must be non-literal in meaning, conventionally recognized by native speakers, and culturally relevant, often tied to the American or urban context represented in the song.

Once the idioms were identified, they were classified using Adam Makkai's (1972) typology of idiomatic expressions. This framework includes various categories such as phrasal verb idioms, tournures, irreversible binomials, phrasal compounds, and incorporating verb idioms. Each idiom was then interpreted semantically by examining its contextual use in the lyrics alongside its figurative meaning, referencing semantic theory and idiom dictionaries.

Following semantic analysis, the idioms were examined for their cultural significance. This stage employed insights from cultural linguistics to uncover how the idioms reflect the values, identity, and sociocultural realities of New York City and American urban life more broadly. The interpretations were cross-referenced with academic sources on idiomatic expressions and cultural analysis to strengthen validity.

Throughout the research process, the primary instrument of analysis was the researcher, who engaged directly with the text and employed supporting materials such as semantic dictionaries, linguistic theory, and annotated lyric databases. This interpretive approach enabled a rich, layered understanding of how idiomatic language in music can serve both communicative and cultural functions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Idiomatic expressions are a vital aspect of any language, embodying both linguistic complexity and cultural specificity. Their study provides insight into how language functions beyond literal communication, revealing layers of meaning that are often deeply rooted in a community's shared experiences and worldview.

According to Palmer (1981), idioms are "semantic units whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of their separate components." This non-compositional nature is what makes idioms both fascinating and challenging, especially for language learners. In a similar vein, Cruse (1986) emphasizes that idioms function as single units of meaning despite their multi-word structure, and their meanings are often metaphorical or symbolic.

The theoretical foundation for this study rests primarily on the idiom typology developed by Adam Makkai (1972), who classifies idiomatic expressions into several categories. These include phrasal verb idioms (e.g., "give up"), tournures (e.g., "kick the bucket"), irreversible binomials (e.g., "bread and butter"), phrasal compounds (e.g., "cold war"), and incorporating verb idioms (e.g., "go fishing"). Makkai's framework is instrumental in identifying and categorizing the idioms found in *Empire State of Mind*, allowing for a structured analysis of their forms and meanings.

In addition to classification, understanding idioms requires examining their semantic dimensions. Larson (1984) describes idioms as forms of figurative language that "cannot be translated literally without loss of meaning." Semantic analysis involves decoding the metaphorical or symbolic intent behind an expression, which often requires contextual and cultural knowledge. For instance, the phrase "concrete jungle" in *Empire State of Mind* conveys not only a literal image of a cityscape but also the intense and competitive nature of life in New York City.

From a cultural perspective, language and idioms serve as reflections of societal values and identities. As Kramsch (1998) argues, "language expresses cultural reality, embodies cultural reality, and symbolizes cultural reality." This view supports the notion that idioms are more than stylistic flourishes—they are cultural artifacts that encapsulate how people perceive their world. The idioms used in *Empire State of Mind* illustrate urban life, ambition, and resilience, themes central to the cultural narrative of New York.

Moreover, idioms in music provide an especially vivid space for exploration because lyrics often blend personal expression with shared cultural meanings. According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2010), "songs are a rich source of idioms and offer authentic contexts that enhance language learning and cultural understanding." This intersection between idioms, music, and culture highlights the potential of songs as pedagogical tools in language learning contexts.

Previous studies on idioms in literature, film, and music support the relevance of idiomatic analysis. For example, research by Liantas (2002) emphasizes the importance of teaching idioms in ESL/EFL settings through multimedia, including music, to improve comprehension and cultural literacy. Similarly, Liu (2008) notes that authentic exposure to idioms through popular media helps learners internalize both their meanings and pragmatic use.

In summary, this literature review underlines the dual function of idioms as both linguistic constructs and cultural conveyors. The classification system provided by Makkai (1972) offers a foundation for formal analysis, while semantic and cultural theories contribute to a deeper interpretation of meaning. Studying idioms in songs like *Empire State of Mind* not only enriches our understanding of language structure but also opens a window into the cultural psyche of English-speaking societies.

DISCUSSION

This part presents and analyzes the idiomatic expressions found in the song *Empire State of Mind*. Using Adam Makkai's (1972) idiom typology as the framework, the lyrics were closely examined to identify expressions that carry meanings beyond their literal interpretation. The analysis also considers the cultural context of these idioms and how they reflect life in New York City, a central theme of the song.

1. Identified Idiomatic Expressions

A number of idiomatic expressions were identified in the song, including:

- **"Concrete jungle where dreams are made of"**

This expression is a metaphorical idiom that combines the harsh, unyielding nature of the city ("concrete jungle") with the hopeful promise of ambition ("dreams are made of"). Semantically, it describes New York as both overwhelming and full of opportunity. Culturally, it evokes the American

Dream, where hard work in a challenging environment can lead to success. This phrase aligns with Makkaï's phrasal compound idioms.

- **“If I can make it here, I can make it anywhere”**

This well-known phrase is an irreversible binomial idiom. It underscores the belief that success in New York City –considered one of the toughest cities in the world –translates into the ability to succeed anywhere else. The cultural resonance of this idiom lies in its association with perseverance and excellence, typical traits attributed to New Yorkers.

- **“Came here to do life”**

Though less conventional, this idiom borrows from prison slang, where “doing life” refers to a life sentence. In the song, however, it is recontextualized to mean fully engaging with life in the city. This tournure reflects how idiomatic language can shift in meaning based on context, and it mirrors the gritty realism and ambition embedded in the New York experience.

- **“Empire State of Mind”**

While not an idiom in the traditional linguistic sense, this title phrase functions idiomatically to convey a mental and emotional state associated with New York: ambition, resilience, and identity. It symbolizes both a literal place (New York, the Empire State) and a figurative mindset.

2. Semantic Analysis

Each idiom found in the song contributes to the overarching narrative of the city as a place of struggle and aspiration. Drawing from Larson (1984), idioms serve as figurative expressions whose meanings cannot be interpreted word-for-word. For example, “concrete jungle” does not refer to a literal jungle but instead evokes the complexity and chaos of urban life. These idioms enhance the emotional impact of the lyrics, making the song resonate with listeners on both personal and cultural levels.

3. Cultural Analysis

As Kramsch (1998) observes, language is a reflection of cultural identity. The idioms in *Empire State of Mind* construct an image of New York that is at once iconic and realistic. The city is portrayed as a beacon of hope, particularly for marginalized voices striving for recognition. Lyrics such as “These streets will make you feel brand new / Big lights will inspire you” express not only the grandeur of the city but also the transformative effect it has on people.

In this way, idioms are used not just for stylistic effect but as tools to project a lived experience. They reflect the melting pot of cultures, the fast-paced rhythm of city life, and the enduring allure of success in a competitive environment.

4. Discussion

The idiomatic expressions in *Empire State of Mind* reveal the deep entwinement of language and place. Each phrase contributes to a larger cultural narrative, echoing New York's reputation as a land of opportunity and resilience. These idioms provide insight into how urban identity is constructed linguistically, supporting the view that idioms are a mirror to societal values (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2010).

The findings reinforce Makkai's classification while highlighting the dynamic use of idioms in contemporary media. Songs like this serve not only as entertainment but also as cultural texts that transmit ideologies, histories, and dreams through figurative language.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of idiomatic expressions in the song *Empire State of Mind* by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys through the lens of Makkai's (1972) typology of idioms. The analysis identified several idiomatic expressions that reflect themes of aspiration, hardship, identity, and cultural pride associated with New York City. Phrases such as "concrete jungle," "make it here, make it anywhere," and "Empire State of Mind" demonstrate how idioms are embedded in cultural narratives, shaping how individuals perceive and express their experiences.

The findings confirm that idioms in music serve not only as stylistic devices but also as vehicles of cultural meaning. As Larson (1984) explains, idioms function beyond the sum of their individual words, requiring contextual and cultural understanding for accurate interpretation. Similarly, Kramsch (1998) argues that language is a medium through which culture is transmitted and performed. In *Empire State of Mind*, idiomatic expressions evoke both the allure and the challenges of life in New York, making the city not just a setting but a symbol of broader cultural and emotional experiences.

By applying Makkai's classification, this study revealed the dynamic roles idioms play in popular music, particularly in representing localized yet universally resonant themes.

The findings also underscore the pedagogical and research value of song lyrics in exploring figurative language and sociocultural identity.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following suggestions are offered:

1. **For Educators and Language Learners:**

The use of song lyrics containing idiomatic expressions can be a powerful tool for teaching English as a second or foreign language. As idioms are often challenging for learners, integrating music into the curriculum provides a context-rich, engaging method to build both linguistic and cultural competence.

2. **For Future Researchers:**

This study can serve as a foundation for further research exploring idiomatic language in various musical genres or across different cultural contexts. Comparative studies could examine how idioms reflect societal values in different regions, while translation studies might investigate how idioms are adapted across languages.

3. **For Curriculum Developers:**

Developing language materials that incorporate idioms from authentic sources such as music can bridge the gap between academic English and real-world usage. Such materials would enhance learners' communicative competence and awareness of figurative and cultural meanings in everyday language.

In sum, idiomatic expressions serve as rich, meaningful, and culturally embedded language features. Their analysis within the context of popular music, such as *Empire State of Mind*, offers insight into the intersection of language, identity, and culture—making idioms not just linguistic units, but cultural artifacts worth exploring in both academic and educational settings.

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