

## **Teaching Idioms Connected to Business English and Colors**

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**Abstract:** *It is widely acknowledged that metaphors and idioms play a key role in understanding the ways in which people from various cultures construct and envisage the world via their mother tongue. Having in view the tight interconnections between language and culture, the ESP teaching process should develop the students' linguistic and (inter)cultural competences as well, especially when it comes to the teaching of metaphoric and idiomatic expressions. The literature has highlighted the importance of teaching idioms and metaphors also in specialized languages, such as economics, law and medicine; for instance, in business, color symbolism and idioms can be employed in order to communicate the key features of a product. This paper tackles several aspects related to the concept of metaphor and idiom, the meanings conveyed by various color idioms in business English, the importance of teaching idioms to ESP students (with a focus on business English), and briefly presents several recommended activities that can be employed when teaching (business) idioms.*

**Keywords:** *English for Specific Purposes, idioms, metaphors, colors, business English, teaching activities*

### **Introduction**

Lakoff and Johnson (4-5), in their book, “Metaphors We Live By”, explain the metaphorical nature of our “ordinary conceptual system”, and state that *the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*”. They also provide an excellent example: “Argument is War”, where *arguments* can be indefensible, attacked, right on target, won, demolished, shot down.

The literature highlights the important role played by metaphors and idioms in comprehending the ways in which various cultures construct and envisage the world via their mother tongue. Taking into consideration this aspect and the interminglement between language and culture, ESP teachers should also have in view the enhancement of the students' linguistic and (inter)cultural competences, particularly when teaching metaphoric and idiomatic expressions connected to the students' field of study.

Across time, renowned scholars, such as Nida, Baker or Katan pinpointed in their research the importance that should be paid to both the

linguistic and cultural differences between the source language and the target language. While Nida drew the attention to the challenges that the translator faces due to cultural discrepancies, Baker tackled the pragmatic level of the text, and Katan studied the implications of the cultural level. In her turn, Teodora Popescu (164) professed for the development of “linguistic and intercultural competences in the two languages, along with proactive attitudes, as well as sound knowledge of history, economy, and politics of the countries or ethnic groups involved”.

Scholars further professed for the relevance of metaphoric and idiomatic expressions, as they boost the understanding of the ways in which various cultures envision and transpose their perceptions and comprehension of the world and inscribe it into their mother tongue; thus, metaphors and idioms bear the imprint of various cultural elements. In this regard, Lakoff and Johnson (12) explained that “a culture may be thought of as providing (...) a pool of available metaphors for making sense of reality”. He also added that “to live by a metaphor is to have your reality structured by that metaphor and to base your perceptions and actions upon that structuring of reality”. Stefan Avădanei’s perspective (16), according to which metaphors are present in “absolutely all perceived dimensions of human existence”, strengthens the aforementioned ideas about the ways in which metaphors mirror reality, cultural elements and the human understanding of reality.

In their turn, Maasen and Weingart (9) envisaged metaphors as “messengers of meaning”, while Resche (78) highlights their usefulness in linguistic research, as they connect linguistics and other disciplines, such as biology, mechanics, physics. The literature has thus highlighted the importance of teaching idioms and metaphors also in specialized languages, such as economics, law and medicine. In this regard, Baramée Kheovichai pinpointed the implications of metaphors in business English; for instance, color symbolism and idioms can be employed in order to convey the particularities of a product or brand, types of goods, jobs or various business situations. However, this author also drew the attention to the tight interconnections between cultures and the various meanings of idioms and metaphors, as the same phrase – for instance the symbol of a certain color – may have different and even opposing meanings.

### **Idioms in general and specialized English**

One can notice that idioms can be used both in general English, on a regular basis, and in Specialized English (for example, English for Economics, Legal English): an “above board” deal, transaction (honest), to be an “ace in the hole” (any plan or thing kept hidden until needed), to give somebody the “acid test” (a thorough, conclusive trial), “to cost an arm and a leg” (very/too

expensive), to work “around the clock” (24 hours a day), to be “as easy as falling off a log” (very easy), to be “as mad as a wet hen” (very angry), “as/like oil and water” (unable or unwilling to mix together easily), “a backbreaker job” (difficult job), “to be in the bag” (successfully settled or arranged), “to be on the ball” (to be quick to understand, act; efficient), “to be above one’s head” (be too difficult to understand), “to be beside oneself with anger/ happiness” (to be very angry/ happy), “to be caught red-handed” (caught in an act of wrongdoing), “to be in hot water” (in trouble), “It beats me” (I don’t understand this), “to be framed” (to be falsely accused of something, using false evidence), “to be good at duckling difficult issues” (to know that it is safer not to discuss issues that are hotly disputed), “be in another person’s shoes” (to be in someone’s place), “to be in the black” (to be in credit or make profit), “to be in the chips” (to have plenty of money), “to be left out in the cold” (not to get something that everybody else got), “to be loaded” (to have lots of money), “to be on one’s last legs” (to be in a very bad condition; to be in a very bad financial situation, about to fail), “to be on the horns of a dilemma”/ “between a rock and a hard place”/ “between the devil and the deep blue sea”/ “between the rock and the hard spot” (faced with two or more alternatives or choice, all of which are bad), “to be on the right track” (to think in a way that is likely to lead to a correct result), “to be on the same wavelength with someone” (to have the same opinions as somebody else), “below the belt” (unfair remark), “between wind and water” (vulnerable), “bigwig”/ “big wheel”/ “big cheese”/ “kingpin”/ “top banana” (an important person), “to bite the dust” (to die), “to bite the hand that fed you” (to be ungrateful), “black day” (a day when everything goes wrong), “to blow the deal” (cause a plan or operation to fail as a result of a stupid mistake), “blue-collar job” (a job where one uses his/her muscles), “to have both feet on the ground” (to have a good understanding of reality/to be very practical), “Bottleneck” (a place or person who acts as an obstacle to progress or free movement), “break a leg” (good luck), “to break the ice” (make people who have just met each other to feel less nervous and more willing to talk), “to bring home the bacon” (to earn the family’s income), “bucket of worms” (a difficult, complicated situation, problem), “to burn a hole in one’s pocket” (to spend money quickly), “to burn one’s bridges/boats” (destroy any chance of turning back or changing one’s decision), “to be burnt out” (mentally or physically exhausted), “burn the midnight oil” (to work very late at night in order to achieve something), “to go by the book” (to follow rules or orders exactly as they are written) (see Buzarna-Tihenea Gălbează and Nădrag).

### **Metaphors in business English: colors**

On the website *Color Matters*, Jill Morton starts her presentation of several “Color Symbolism Theories” (chapter also included in her e-book *Color Logic for PowerPoint*) by defining “the communicative properties of a color” in connection with natural associations (which are timeless and universal, as they are shared by all people, such as the connections between blue and the sky or between green and the grass) and psychological or cultural associations (which are not universal and are embedded in cultural settings, such as the connections between orange and optimism or energy, the association of red with courage, danger or passion). Morton also identifies several sources that influenced many of the cultural meanings associated to colors, i.e., cultural associations (such as those related to customs, traditions, geography), political and historical associations (for instance the colors associated to political parties, to the royalty, the colors of flags), religious and mythical associations (for example, the colors connected to deities or to spiritual beliefs), linguistic associations (the words used to denote colors in a certain language can be influenced by certain factors from the respective culture) and contemporary usage and fads (stemming from modern conventions and trends).

For example, the British five-pound bill is printed in hues of blue and/ while in Iran blue is connected to the idea of paradise (these could be seen as cultural associations). The political connotations of blue can be noticed in its presence in many flags (such as Romanian, French, American, British, Ukrainian, Finnish, Argentinian, Greek, etc.); moreover, in the USA, the states that vote for the Democratic Party are labelled as blue states, while in the UK blue is associated to conservative parties. O’Grady explains that sunlight plays an important role in people’s perception of blue and that it is harder for those who live in areas with lots of sun to distinguish between green and blue; therefore, the same scholar asserts that there are languages (such as those spoken in East Africa and Central America) where the same word refers to both green and blue.

Morton underlines that not only does the wide array of color associations and uses vary across cultures and time spans, but it also differs within the same culture, in the same time period, and sometimes with opposing symbolism, i.e., both positive and negative. Such an instance is represented by the association of blue with sadness (“singing the blues”) or unreliability (“blue-sky ideas”), on the one hand (i.e., with negative situations) and with stability (“blue chip stocks”) or loyalty (“true blue”), on the other hand (i.e., with positive situations).

In business, colors play an important role in setting the expectations for a certain product, communicating its key characteristics or allowing consumers to identify elements related to brand packaging.

A search for idioms with colors (more specifically, idioms that are or that can be used in the business field) revealed the abundance of the wide array of meanings that can be conveyed by color symbolism. In the following section, in order to highlight the aforementioned diversity as far as color symbolism is concerned, we will briefly present the general or the most common meanings associated to red, blue, yellow, green, black and white, and some idioms with these colors that can be connected to the business sector. The definitions of these idioms, cited in the paper, are extracted from *Cambridge Dictionary* online.

In general, *red* is the color of love, passion and lust; moreover, it can also symbolize danger or importance (for instance, it is used in many road signs or warning signs). Therefore, red can be associated with both positive and negative meanings. Idioms such as “red-letter day” (“a special, happy, and important day that you will always remember”, *Cambridge Dictionary* online) and “red hot” (something extreme, very new or exciting) convey positive meanings, associated to happiness, importance and excitement. In their turn, the idioms “red carpet treatment” and “roll out the red carpet” are based on the syntagm “red carpet”, which refers to “a long, red floor covering that is put down for an important or famous person when they go on an official visit or attend a special event” (*Cambridge Dictionary* online). Negative meanings are conveyed by idioms such as “to catch someone red-handed” (to see someone while committing an illegal act), “to see red” (to be furious), “red flag” (a sign of danger), “red tape” (“official rules and processes that seem unnecessary and delay results”), “not a red cent” (no money), “in the red” (In debt; “spending more money than you earn”), “red herring” (“a fact, idea, or subject that takes people’s attention away from the central point being considered”), “red ink” (“a situation in which a company is losing a lot of money”). All these idioms (as defined by *Cambridge Dictionary* online) are connected to the idea of loss, anger or danger.

*Blue* is also employed in order to convey a wide array of meanings, as it is usually associated with serenity, stability and calmness (being the color of the bright and clear sky). It can also symbolize inspiration, life and wisdom. However blue can also represent melancholy, sadness and depression. As far as the idioms that can be related to the business field are concerned, someone “true-blue” is, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary* online “a completely loyal” person; if somebody receives “a blue ribbon”, it means that s/he gets “the highest prize in a competition or event”, while a

blue-chip company or investment “can be trusted and is not likely to fail”. Something that happens “once in a blue moon” takes place rarely while something that happens “out of the blue” is unexpected. Similarly, the idea of rapidness and surprise is expressed by the idiom “bolt of the blue”, which means “something important or unusual that happens suddenly or unexpectedly”, and by “to talk a blue streak”, i.e. “to talk quickly and without stopping” (*Cambridge Dictionary* online). “A blueprint” refers to “an early plan or design that explains how something might be achieved”. Negative meanings are transmitted by the idioms “blue-sky idea”/ “blue-sky thinking”, defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* online as “using the imagination to think of ideas that do not yet have practical uses or make money”, “blue-sky securities”, which refer to worthless stocks and bonds, and “until you are blue in the face”, i.e. “wasting your efforts because you will get no results”.

As far as *yellow* is concerned, being the color associated to the sun, it commonly represents sunshine and joy. This positive meaning is encountered in the idiom “a yellow brick road”, which refers to a path considered to lead towards success. However, yellow is also associated with fear and cowardice. For instance, “yellow light” – associated to the yellow traffic light, which urges drivers to slow down and prepare to stop – is used as a warning to slow down, “yellow streak” refers to someone who has a penchant towards cowardice and can be easily scared, and “yellow belly” denotes a coward. A negative meaning is also conveyed by the idiom “yellowdog contract”, which refers to a contract concluded between an employer and an employee, where the latter waives the right to join a labor union.

*Green* is generally connected to nature, health and youth, being thus seen, from this perspective, as a relaxing color. This association is evidenced by idioms such as “greenhorn”, which makes reference to a beginner, and “greenfield site”, which, according to *Cambridge Dictionary* online, is “an area of land, usually in the countryside, that has never had buildings on it before”.

Being the color of traffic lights signaling that drivers can start or keep driving, “green light” may also refer to the approval of an activity or event. Positive meanings are conveyed by “greener pastures” (i.e., new opportunities provided by another activity or place), “going green” (making changes in order to enhance environment protection), “green taxes” (which are aimed at discouraging the behavior that harms the environment).

Nevertheless, green is also associated to greed and money, jealousy and sickness. Jealousy is implied by the phrase “the grass is always greener on the other side” (defined by *Cambridge Dictionary* online as “something that you say that means that other people always seem to be in a better

situation than you, although they may not be”). In its turn, the idiom “turn green” refers to the complexion of a sick person. Greed is suggested by “greenmail”, which refers to “the act of buying enough shares in a company to be able to control it, in order to force the owners of the company to buy back these shares at a very high price” (*Cambridge Dictionary* online).

*Black* is usually connected to negative meanings, as it is the symbol of death, sorrow, darkness and evil. Sadness is suggested by “black day”, which refers to a bad day, when something tragic happens. Malice and negative behavior are reflected in idioms such as “to blackball” (i.e., “to vote against allowing someone to be a member of an organization or group”), blacklist (“a list of people, countries, etc. who are considered by a particular authority or group to be unacceptable and who should be avoided and not trusted”), “black sheep” (“a person who has done something bad that brings embarrassment or shame to his or her family”), black market (i.e., “illegal trading of goods”), blackleg (“a person who works while others that they work with are on strike”), “the pot calling the kettle black” (one “should not criticize someone else for a fault that they have themselves”). All the above definitions, extracted from *Cambridge Dictionary* online also suggest the ideas of marginalization, exclusion, deviation from the accepted norms, and unlawfulness.

Sobriety is reflected by “black tie”, which, in fact, refers to formal clothes that people wear when attending special, official events. However, black is also the color of the fertile soil and can be connected to fertility and abundance. When a bank account is “in the black”, it means that there is money in it. Black Friday is also a day in November when prices are reduced in many shops.

The contrast between black and white suggests clarity in the idiom “a black-and-white subject/ situation”, i.e. “one in which it is easy to understand what is right and wrong” (*Cambridge Dictionary* online).

*White* is usually the color of purity, innocence and faith. For instance, “a white lie” is based on good intentions, as it refers to “a lie that is told in order to be polite or to stop someone from being upset by the truth”. However, it is also associated with negative meanings (as defined by *Cambridge Dictionary* online), such as in the idioms “white elephant” (i.e., “something that is expensive, or that costs a lot of money to keep in good condition, but that has no useful purpose and is no longer wanted”) and “to whitewash” (“an attempt to stop people finding out the true facts about a situation”).

### **Goods and colors**

Even goods are classified in terms of color. In his textbook entitled *Check Your English Vocabulary for Business and Administration*, Rawdon Wyatt (67-68) states that the category of “brown goods” includes the electrical equipment designed for home entertainment (for instance, TVs, audio and video systems), while the “white goods” encompass household appliances in the kitchen (such as cookers, refrigerators or dishwashers) and household linen. It is noteworthy that the latter are labeled as white because this is the usual color of such products. The aforementioned author further explains that “yellow goods” encompass those items that are rarely replaced, as they are very high-priced and kept in use for a quite long time (such as cars). In this case, the label yellow might be associated to gold, which is a very expensive metal, used in jewelry; thus, the color yellow, in this situation, may symbolize high prices and value. “Red goods” are situated at the opposite pole by the scholar, as they are sold extremely fast and need to be replaced rapidly (for instance, food); this label may reside in the association of the color red with activity and speed. In their turn, the “orange goods” are in between these two categories (i.e., yellow and red), because they represent items that are replaced periodically (such as clothes); this association may be entailed by the fact that orange is a mixture of yellow and red and orange goods are neither replaced as rarely as the yellow ones nor as fast as the red ones.

### **Colors and collars**

Colors are also employed in combination with the word “collar” in order to denote various types of jobs. These associations are usually based on the color of the uniforms worn by the persons performing the respective jobs or by the nature of the respective jobs.

Besides the familiar white-collars (those persons who work in offices) and blue-collars (workers from the factory floor), in her article “Complete Collar Colors: Understanding Consumer Personas”, Campbell also mentions the following categories: black-collars (making reference to the nature of the jobs, such as those in the oil and coal mining sectors; the meaning of this idiom underwent some transformations and nowadays it is also associated to those creative jobs performed by people whose unofficial uniform is represented by the black attire); gold-collars (highly-skilled professionals, such as engineers, surgeons, analysts, scientists), green-collars (persons working in the environmental sector), red-collars (persons working in the government), pink-collars (jobs mainly performed by women, such as those from sales, entertainment, customer interaction) and grey-collars (referring either to a mixture between white-collars and blue-collars – such as fire

fighters, technicians, police officers – or to those who still work although they reached the retirement age). Indiran Jayasri, in her systematization of the “Collar color spectrum of workforce”, a table presented in the article “Is Your Collar in? A Critical Analysis on the Coverage of Indian Labor Laws”, also includes in the black-collar category the persons working in black marketing or those performing secretive activities.

As far as red-collar workers are concerned, in his article, “Do you know the colour of your collar?”, published in *The Economic Times. Indian Times*, Yatish Rajawat states that this category also encompasses workers performing creative tasks, such as those “in advertising agencies, production houses, newspapers or other such organizations”, without fixed working hours.

Ebersole identifies other interesting collar categories, such as orange-collars (denoting prison workers), purple-collars (making reference to skilled persons who are mainly white-collars but who perform both white and blue collar tasks, such as technicians), chrome-collars (robots performing automated tasks) and brown-collars (jobs in the army). Jayasri Indiran adds to the orange-collars the persons working in healthcare services. She also mentions the light blue collars, which refer to those working in prison administration, and the scarlet-collars, a category which includes workers from the pornography industry. This latter term reminds of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel entitled *The Scarlet Letter*, where the protagonist wore the scarlet letter “A”, as a symbol of social stigma and shame, because she had committed adultery.

The yellow-collar is another category of color-collar jobs, which, among many others, is described by Garg as being connected to unconventional fields and performed especially by millennials who transform their creative pursuits into careers. In his turn, Yatish Rajawat defines the yellow-collars in a different way, i.e. as highly-educated workers who “are in the mid or top rung of the workforce”, who “sometimes need to work very long hours”, and whose rights are restricted, as “they can be fired anytime”. The above-mentioned author connects the yellow-collar label to the workers’ pale or yellow complexion, caused by long working hours they spend in fluorescent light. In his article, Yatish Rajawat also mentions the indigo-collars, i.e., highly skilled workers performing their activities “on a highly automated shop floor”, handling automated machines and controlling the inventory and data flow on the shop floor.

Therefore, all the above-mentioned types of collars reveal that the associations between colors and jobs reside in factors such as the color of the uniform worn by the people performing the respective jobs or the nature of the job (black-collars, orange-collars, brown-collars, green-collars, chrome-

collars), but also in cultural associations (pink is associated to womanhood, gold – to richness and value, scarlet – to shame and dishonor), political associations (red-collars). Moreover, these associations differ from one culture to another, i.e., red-collars in the USA make reference to government employees, while red-collars in India designate people performing creative tasks (see Yatish Rajawat); orange-collars in general refer to prison laborers, while in India, they are persons who carry out activities in healthcare services (see Jayasri Indiran); in the USA, the yellow-collars are millennials performing activities in unconventional fields and transforming their creative pursuits into careers (see Garg), while in India they denote highly-educated persons, with a yellow complexion and restricted labor rights, and who work long hours in fluorescent light (see Yatish Rajawat).

### **Teaching idioms: suggested activities**

For a proper understanding, idioms should be taught and studied in context. For instance, teachers can ask students to solve various reading tasks based on authentic materials such as newspaper articles that contain business idioms; they can show students short videos, news segments, commercials or advertisements, ask them to solve certain listening tasks and extract and discuss the idioms from the respective materials. Moreover, teachers should encourage or even require students to use certain idioms in various writing and speaking activities. For example, the teacher can organize the class in small groups and ask them to talk about the times they had difficulties in understanding someone because of the idiomatic language. Then, s/he can give each group several conversation questions that include previously taught idioms.

Claudia Pesce, in her article “How to Teach English Idioms and Their Meaning”, posted on the website *BusyTeacher*, suggests other several activities that can be employed in order to facilitate the teaching of idioms, i.e., grouping a small number of idioms into categories, presenting idioms in context, demanding students to use idioms in conversations on various topics (depending on the lesson topic) and acting these conversations out, playing various entertaining games and using worksheets based on authentic materials (such as newspaper, journal or magazine articles, advertisements, songs, videos, providing thus real-life contexts). The author of the aforementioned article warns teachers about the dangers of teaching too many idioms at the same time, as this can overwhelm students with too much information and hinders their learning process; in this regard, the number of idioms to be taught – recommended by the author – is between five and eight (and no more than ten). The introduction of idioms in context, such as in short conversations (rather than just presenting a list of idioms and their

meanings), assists students in better understanding their meanings and in learning them. Moreover, Pesce suggests that teachers can even ask students to guess the meaning of the respective idioms, based on the contexts provided, and then encourage them to work in pairs and employ the idioms in short written conversations of their own, and then act them out in front of their classmates, in order to provide them more practice opportunities and more contexts for the respective idioms, enhancing thus their learning. In order to avoid monotony and boredom and to enliven the classroom atmosphere, teachers can involve students in various funny games and entertaining activities; moreover, the students' interest will be awakened, boosting their participation in the respective activities.

### **Conclusion**

The diversity in the use of colors and their associations is obvious, because color meanings and symbolism occur on an individual, cultural and universal basis. The same color may have very different associations and meanings within the same or different cultures at any time. Color symbolism is also context-dependent and influenced by changes over time. By not teaching students idioms, they will be missing important parts of the vocabulary and cultural elements. It stands to reason that idioms must be taught to upper-intermediate and advanced students, but students in general should benefit from the knowledge of idioms that helps them get good command of the English language.

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