

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE AND ARMENIAN IDIOMS CONTAINING THE WORD ‘FISH’

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Abstract. Currently, a growing number of linguists are turning their attention to how language reflects national culture, particularly through the concept of the linguistic worldview. Research suggests that phraseological units serve as rich repositories of cultural knowledge and hold substantial value in the context of foreign language learning. These expressions significantly contribute to the construction of a nation’s linguistic worldview, functioning as a reflection of its experience. The meanings embedded in phraseological units are deeply connected to background knowledge, individual and collective experience, and the cultural traditions of the people who speak the language. They attribute culturally specific characteristics to objects, encapsulate descriptive scenarios, convey evaluations, and express attitudes. In doing so, phraseological expressions shape a culturally embedded worldview that mirrors a society’s history, customs, behaviors, and its perspectives on the world and interpersonal relationships.

Key words: idioms, phraseological units, zoosemic idioms, culture, fish, Chinese idioms. Armenian idioms

Introduction. Idioms are a significant component of language, reflecting the cultural and historical experiences of people. Various national languages possess unique expressions that, through long-term usage, have evolved into fixed phrases or sentences known as idioms. Both Armenian and Chinese boast ancient linguistic traditions, resulting in a rich inventory of idiomatic expressions.

A particularly vivid and culturally loaded category of idioms includes those with animal components. Across languages, animals are often used metaphorically to convey human traits, behaviors, emotions, or social norms. These idioms not only enrich the expressive capacity of language but also offer a valuable lens through which we can examine cultural symbolism and worldview. Chinese and Armenian, like many languages, make extensive use of animal-related idioms, each reflecting unique associations with specific animals.

This study focuses on one subset of such idioms—those containing the word “*fish*.” Fish occupy a significant place in both Chinese and Armenian linguistic imagery, though their symbolic roles differ across the two cultures. This article examines Chinese and Armenian idioms that include the word “*fish*,” aiming to uncover how two distinct cultures metaphorically conceptualize this creature. By analyzing these idioms, we gain deeper insight into cultural priorities, metaphorical thinking, communicative styles, and underlying worldviews. Through comparative analysis, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how language encodes culture, particularly through the lens of animal symbolism.

Methods. This research adopts a **comparative and cognitive-semantic approach**, drawing on phraseological theory (Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen, 2005) and **Conceptual Metaphor Theory** (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to interpret idiomatic meaning and cultural symbolism. The study first identifies idioms containing the word “**fish**” (鱼 / ձուկ) in both Chinese and Armenian, then categorizes and analyzes them based on semantic fields and cultural meaning. Each idiom is examined for its metaphorical mapping, sociocultural context, and pragmatic use. Comparative analysis highlights both universal human experiences (e.g., adaptability, survival, wisdom) and culture-specific connotations (e.g., prosperity in Chinese vs. silence in Armenian tradition).

Results and discussion. In contemporary Armenian linguistics, the term «**դարձվածք**» (*idiom*) is generally understood as a phraseological unit or phraseological expression. The systematic study of idioms as independent semantic units began to attract scholarly attention in the 1930s, particularly through the pioneering work of **M. Abeghyan**. However, there is still no unified opinion in Armenian linguistic literature regarding the distinction between idioms and phraseological units, nor about the precise scope of phraseology as a field. Some specialists include all fixed expressions within the realm of phraseology, while others limit it to specific groups of word combinations (Suqiasyan, 2004, p. 18).

Supporters of a broader understanding of phraseology include within it proverbs, sayings, aphorisms, compound constructions, collocational terms, and other fixed expressions. In contrast, proponents of a narrower interpretation exclude these and consider only idiomatic expressions as true idioms. Structurally, an idiom is a stable combination of two or more words that conveys a reinterpreted, indivisible meaning and is reproduced in speech as a ready-made linguistic unit (Suqiasyan, 2004, p. 296).

In Chinese linguistics, idioms likewise represent an essential part of the language's expressive system. They can be roughly divided into several categories, including **proverbs (谚语)**, **allusions (典故)**, **chengyu (成语)**, **xiehouyu (歇后语)**, **slang (俚语)**, **idiomatic expressions (惯用语)**, and **colloquial sayings (俗语)** (Guo, 2016, p. 129). Among these, **chengyu** are perhaps the most distinctive and recognizable form. Composed primarily of four characters, they encapsulate moral lessons, historical references, or philosophical reflections, and are considered one of the defining features of Chinese linguistic and cultural heritage (Shi, 1979).

Idioms in both Armenian and Chinese serve not only as stylistic elements but also as reflections of deep-rooted cultural beliefs, social practices, and worldviews. Among the many idiomatic types, those containing animal components—commonly referred to as **zoosemic** idioms—form a particularly expressive and metaphor-rich category. These idioms metaphorically project animal traits onto human behaviors, emotions, and social roles, thereby functioning as linguistic mirrors of cultural perception and collective experience. As noted by Plotnikova (Plotnikova, 2016: 123), “zoosemic idioms are among the oldest layers of vocabulary in the world's languages,” as humans and animals have always shared a close bond. Throughout history, people not only relied on animals for survival but also used them as symbols for characterizing human nature. Consequently, animal names developed stable associations with specific human traits and became metaphorical tools for depicting moral, emotional, and social characteristics.

However, the symbolism of animals varies significantly across cultures. In both Chinese and Armenian, zoosemic idioms serve as linguistic shortcuts for complex cultural ideas and as windows into each society's system of values and worldview. Through their study, we gain insight into how language encodes perception, categorization, and moral judgment.

Within this vast domain of animal-related idioms, fish-related expressions occupy a special place. As one of the earliest animals integrated into human life, the fish has played an important role in human civilization, both materially and symbolically. This enduring presence has naturally led to its metaphorical use in language. In both Armenian and Chinese, idioms containing the word *fish* illustrate how this creature has been perceived, valued, and symbolized through time. These expressions offer insight not only into how each culture associates meaning with animals but also into broader cultural themes such as abundance, adaptability, silence, wisdom, and elusiveness.

Accordingly, the comparative analysis of fish idioms in Chinese and Armenian enables a deeper understanding of the shared human experiences and culture-specific conceptualizations reflected in idiomatic language.

Cultural Symbolism of Fish. In Armenian culture, the fish holds symbolic meanings rooted primarily in Christian tradition and folk beliefs. As one of the earliest Christian nations, Armenia inherited many Christian symbols, among which the fish is closely associated with faith, rebirth, and spiritual nourishment. The fish (ձուկ) appears in early Christian iconography and is often linked to the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, as well as to baptismal symbolism. In Armenian folklore and oral tradition, the fish also represents patience, silence, and subtlety—qualities attributed to both the animal itself and certain human behaviors. Though less commonly emphasized than in Chinese culture, the fish

remains a symbol of mystery, resilience, and quiet wisdom in the Armenian cultural imagination, often appearing in proverbs, parables, and moral teachings.

In Chinese culture, fish are powerful symbols of wealth, prosperity, and abundance, primarily because the Chinese word for "fish" (鱼, yú) sounds like the word for "abundance" (余, yú). This homophony has led to the fish becoming a popular motif in art, literature, and celebrations like the Chinese New Year.

Classification and Analysis of 'Fish' Idioms

Having explored the symbolic meanings attributed to fish in both Armenian and Chinese cultures, the author now turns to the idiomatic expressions that linguistically reflect these cultural perceptions. Idioms offer a condensed form of cultural knowledge, capturing how societies metaphorically interpret elements of their environment, including animals. In both languages, the fish appears not merely as a literal animal but as a symbolic vehicle for expressing deeper values, attitudes, and social behaviors. By analyzing idioms that incorporate the word "fish," we can observe how each culture embeds its worldview into everyday language. The following section presents a comparative examination of selected Chinese and Armenian fish-related idioms to uncover points of convergence and divergence in cultural metaphor and expression.

Selected Chinese Fish Idioms

1. **如鱼得水 (rú yú dé shuǐ)** – *Like a fish in water*
 Meaning: To be in an ideal environment; to feel completely at ease.
 Symbolism: The fish represents natural fit, harmony, and success in favorable conditions.
2. **鱼龙混杂 (yú lóng hùn zá)** – *Fish and dragons mixed together*
 Meaning: A chaotic mixture of good and bad elements.
 Symbolism: Fish symbolize the ordinary, dragons the elite; the idiom highlights confusion and the difficulty of distinguishing quality.
3. **混水摸鱼 (hùn shuǐ mō yú)** – *Catch fish in muddy water*
 Meaning: To take advantage of chaos or disorder for personal gain.
 Symbolism: Fish represent hidden opportunity; the idiom conveys cunning and opportunism.
4. **大鱼大肉 (dà yú dà ròu)** – *Big fish and big meat*
 Meaning: Rich, luxurious meals or excessive indulgence.
 Symbolism: Fish signifies abundance, wealth, and prosperity.
5. **鱼跃龙门 (yú yuè lóng mén)** – *A fish leaps over the dragon gate*
 Meaning: To achieve success or social advancement through hard work.
 Symbolism: Based on legend, the fish represents talent, determination, and transformative effort.
6. **鱼死网破 (yú sǐ wǎng pò)** – *The fish dies and the net breaks*
 Meaning: A desperate struggle in which all parties lose.
 Symbolism: The fish embodies resistance and defiance, even at great personal cost.
7. **池鱼之殃 (chí yú zhī yāng)** – *Disaster for the pond fish*
 Meaning: Innocents suffer as a result of others' conflicts.
 Symbolism: Fish represent uninvolved or vulnerable individuals harmed by external events.
8. **漏网之鱼 (lòu wǎng zhī yú)** – *A fish that escaped the net*
 Meaning: Someone or something that slips away from control or punishment.
 Symbolism: The fish symbolizes the elusive, often used metaphorically for escape or avoidance.
9. **殃及池鱼 (yāng jí chí yú)** – *Disaster spreads to the pond fish*
 Meaning: Innocents suffer because of others' actions.
 Symbolism: Fish again represent bystanders caught in crossfire, emphasizing unintended consequences and injustice.

10. 临渊羡鱼 (lín yuān xiàn yú) – Admiring the fish at the edge of the pond

Meaning: Desiring something without taking action.

Symbolism: The fish represents what is longed for; the idiom warns that wishing alone achieves nothing — effort is required.

In Chinese idioms, the fish (鱼) serves as a multifaceted cultural symbol that reflects a wide spectrum of meanings. In many expressions, such as 如鱼得水 (“like a fish in water”) and 鱼跃龙门 (“a fish leaping over the dragon gate”), the fish represents harmony with one’s environment, personal comfort, and upward social mobility — often achieved through talent and perseverance. These idioms convey positive values such as success, adaptability, and the importance of being in the right circumstances. On the other hand, idioms like 混水摸鱼 (“catching fish in muddy water”) and 鱼龙混杂 (“fish and dragons mixed together”) associate the fish with opportunism, disorder, and the difficulty of discerning value in chaotic situations. In more somber expressions like 殃及池鱼 (“disaster spreads to the pond fish”) and 鱼死网破 (“the fish dies and the net breaks”), the fish becomes a symbol of vulnerability, illustrating how the innocent or powerless often suffer the consequences of others’ conflicts. Additionally, in 临渊羡鱼 (“standing by the abyss admiring the fish”), the fish signifies unreachable desire, serving as a metaphor for longing without action. Through these idioms, we see that the fish is not limited to a singular positive or negative meaning. Rather, it is a flexible image that embodies both fortune and fragility, ambition and futility. This versatility reflects the complexity of Chinese thought, where animal imagery is employed to convey moral, philosophical, and social ideas. The homophony between ‘fish’ and ‘abundance’ has deeply influenced the use of fish symbolism in Chinese idioms, associating the creature with prosperity and good fortune. The idioms highlight how the fish functions as both an auspicious symbol in traditional culture and a tool for expressing deeper truths about human behavior and societal dynamics.

Although Armenian does not have as rich or codified a tradition of *fish-related idioms* as Chinese, there are a few expressions and proverbs that reflect the cultural perceptions of fish—particularly connected to patience, silence, and slipperiness. These reflect qualities associated with fish in Armenian traditional thinking.

Selected Armenian Fish Idioms

1. **Լուռ է ինչպես ձուկ** – Silent as a fish
Meaning: Someone who remains very quiet or doesn’t speak.
Symbolism: Reflects the association of fish with silence and discretion, suggesting restraint, humility, or secrecy.
2. **Ձուկը գլխից է հոսում** – The fish rots from the head
Meaning: Problems or corruption start from leadership.
Symbolism: Used to criticize authority, symbolizing the broader decay of a system starting from the top.
3. **Ձուկ բռնել (Dzook brnel)** – To catch a fish
Meaning: To achieve something valuable or get lucky, often with some effort or trickery.
Symbolism: Fish symbolizes a reward, opportunity, or elusive success that must be pursued carefully.
4. **Անուշ ջրի ձուկ / Ծովի ձուկ** – A fish of sweet water / A fish of the sea
Meaning: A person accustomed to a particular environment or lifestyle.
Symbolism: Contrasts between freshwater and saltwater fish reflect how people are shaped by their surroundings, suggesting individuals thrive best in familiar conditions.
5. **Ցամաք նետված ձուկ** – A fish thrown onto dry land
Meaning: Someone in an uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or helpless situation.
Symbolism: Just as a fish struggles without water, this idiom portrays vulnerability and disorientation when removed from one’s natural environment.
6. **Ցամաքում ձուկ բռնել** – To catch a fish on dry land
Meaning: To attempt something impossible or highly unrealistic.

Symbolism: Reflects the absurdity or futility of acting outside natural boundaries; emphasizes impracticality or unrealistic expectations.

7. **Պղտոր ջրում ձուկ որսալ** – To catch fish in muddy water

Meaning: To take advantage of confusion or disorder for personal gain.

Symbolism: Mirrors the Chinese idiom 混水摸鱼; fish symbolize opportunity, while muddy water represents chaos or moral ambiguity.

8. **Երբ ձուկը ծառ բարձրանա** – When the fish climbs a tree

Meaning: Never; something that is absolutely impossible.

Symbolism: A vivid absurd image emphasizing impossibility, much like the English “when pigs fly.”

9. **Իրեն զգալ ինչպես ձուկը ջրում** – To feel like a fish in water

Meaning: To feel completely at ease or in one’s natural element.

Symbolism: Highlights comfort, familiarity, and harmony with surroundings; functionally equivalent to Chinese 如鱼得水.

10. **Ձուկն իր ջուրը գտավ** – The fish found its water

Meaning: Someone has returned to their ideal or proper place.

Symbolism: Water symbolizes home, purpose, or comfort; reinforces themes of belonging and natural compatibility.

11. **Ճակատին ձկան խաչ ունենալ** – To have the sign of the fish on one's forehead

Meaning: To be destined or marked for misfortune or suffering.

Symbolism: Evokes notions of fate, burden, or divine marking; connects fish symbolism with Christian or fatalistic elements in Armenian culture.

In Armenian idiomatic expressions, the image of **the fish** (ձուկ) functions as a multidimensional symbol representing a range of emotional, cultural, and existential concepts. Much like in Chinese, fish idioms in Armenian reflect environmental harmony, vulnerability, ingenuity, and even moral judgment. Several idioms (*Լուռ է ինչպես ձուկ*, *Իրեն զգալ ինչպես ձուկը ջրում*, *Ձուկն իր ջուրը գտավ*) focus on the idea of naturalness and comfort, portraying the fish as a creature that thrives only in its own element. These expressions suggest that people, like fish, need the right environment to succeed — emphasizing themes of belonging, identity, and adaptation.

Other idioms (*Ցամաք նետված ձուկ*, *Ցամաքում ձուկ բռնել*, *Երբ ձուկը ծառ բարձրանա*) highlight the fish's helplessness outside water, symbolizing displacement, futility, or impossible situations. The imagery of a fish out of water powerfully evokes emotional states such as vulnerability, disorientation, and alienation — making it a poignant metaphor for social or personal struggle.

The moral or critical dimension of fish also appears in idioms such as *Ձուկը գլխից է հոսում*, which criticizes leadership, and *Պղտոր ջրում ձուկ որսալ*, which implies opportunism during chaos. These expressions reflect Armenian cultural concerns with justice, authority, and ethical behavior.

One especially unique idiom, *Ճակատին ձկան խաչ ունենալ*, links the fish to Christian symbolism and fate, showing how idiomatic language in Armenian may also absorb religious and spiritual associations — something less explicit in Chinese idioms.

Taken together, Armenian idioms present the fish as a symbol of adaptability, sensitivity to surroundings, and existential fragility, with deep roots in everyday observation, moral reflection, and even metaphysical thought. While some parallels can be drawn with Chinese idioms (e.g., comfort in water or opportunism in chaos), Armenian fish idioms display a stronger tendency toward fatalism, emotional nuance, and ethical critique. These symbolic associations with faith, patience, and silence inform the way fish are conceptualized in Armenian idioms, reflecting spiritual and moral dimensions.

Conclusion

Comparing Chinese and Armenian fish idioms reveals how similar natural imagery is employed in diverse cultural contexts to encode distinct values and worldviews. In Chinese culture, fish largely symbolize prosperity, success, and moral lessons about effort and opportunity. Armenian fish idioms emphasize restraint, environment, vulnerability, and spiritual destiny, reflecting the country’s religious heritage and social concerns.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that animal metaphors serve not only as linguistic devices but also as mirrors of cultural identity and collective experience. Understanding such idiomatic

expressions enriches cross-cultural communication and deepens appreciation for the intertwined nature of language, culture, and thought.

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