

Full Length Research Paper

# Elucidating idioms through idioms: A metalinguistic contemplation of some issues on “Befogging Idioms”

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An idiom is a phrase which you cannot understand by putting together the meanings of the words in it. For example, *pull your socks up* has nothing to do with socks or pulling them up, but means "try your best". There are more than 5500 common idioms suitable for intermediate learners, yet the total number of English idioms is far greater. Idioms (McCaig and Manser, 1986) are a very important part of the English language: you may be told that if you want to go far you should *pull your socks up* and use your *gray matter*. The present article employs an analytic metalinguistic approach to treating the issue of idioms, their problematic areas, the appropriacy and correctness of their use in communicative situations, and the like while sticking to the fundamentals of idioms metalinguistically; that is, the author makes use of an idiomatic language and diction to describe and explain the idioms themselves. The author has made an attempt to present his ideas and concepts under the titles below: *Introduction, Do Idioms Really Call the Shot? Are Idioms Teachable? Where and When to Use Idioms?*

**Key words:** Idiom, literal meaning, whole meaning, teaching, metalinguistic, idiomatic expression.

## INTRODUCTION

*Do you like to be the apple of your father's eye? Have you ever compared apples and oranges? Do you go bananas when you are so bored? Are you the type of person who does not know beans about computers? Why have you got cauliflower ears? Has your life always been a bowl of cherries?* In our daily conversation, we may face idiomatic expressions whose meanings are not readily decodable. In Richards' terms (2005), an idiom is stereotyped by an expression which functions as a single

unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts. For instance, *He washed his hands off the matter* means *He refused to have anything more to do with the matter*. A French speaker would no doubt comprehend the meaning of "continue" better than that of "take up", while an English speaker may meet some difficulty in clarifying the semantic aspect of this construction regarding its components.

In fact, the careful investigation of various sorts of

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idiomatic items would clarify many issues which seem to be odd to us regarding form and sense. While we can similarly exemplify idioms as: “*angling for*” and “*fishing for*” in which the verbs could be freely substituted for, we cannot say “*He had difficulty making up his thought*” for “*He had difficulty making up his mind*”. This means that we cannot use “*thought*” instead of “*mind*” in this idiom, though use is made of both to express the same meaning.

In a quite similar way, we cannot use the sentence “*strike the nail on the head*” instead of the sentence “*hit the nail on the head*”. Here, the second sentence is an unusual one and basically there is not such an English idiom.

A person whose native language is not English, or a native English speaker who has not thoroughly mastered English idioms, may commit such errors. Ponder on the following idioms (Barzegar, 2006, p. 21): “*I heard it through the grapevine; That car is a real lemon; Jack and John are like two peas in a pod; I really got myself into the pickle this time; this situation is a real hot potato.*” Should these idioms be used in formal or informal contexts? The present article gives and explains some hints on the issues under discussion. The author has made an attempt to elaborate on the topic meta-linguistically, that is, to use an idiomatic language and diction to describe and explain the topic.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Some useful works have so far contemplated the issue of idioms and idiomatic expressions. To begin with, Grant and Bauer (2004) postulated that a large proportion of text is made up of a variety of multi-word units (MWUs). One type of MWU is ‘idioms’. While linguists have previously established the required criteria to define an idiom, the criteria have often been general so as to apply to the wide-ranging MWUs (multi-word units) found in this category, and have been a description of them rather than a definition. They presented a more restrictive definition of idiom in the form of a test which divides MWUs into ‘core idioms’, ‘figuratives’, and ‘ONCEs’. They found that the majority of idioms would be put into the ‘figuratives’ category. While ‘figuratives’ also present problems for the EFL/ESL learners, the more narrowly defined ‘core idioms’ are the most difficult set of MWUs for learners to come to terms with and are therefore the motivation for redefining idioms.

Also, Martinez (2013) believes that there is little disagreement that multi-word expressions should feature in L2 pedagogy. Rather less agreement seems to exist; however, regarding which items should be included, and why. They elucidated two important properties of multi-word expressions—frequency and semantic opacity and presented a model that translates those concepts into a

visual framework is presented. Finally, they discussed the rationale for the framework in depth, as well as how it can be used by ELT practitioners.

Moreover, according to Martinez and Schmitt (2012), there is little dispute that formulaic sequences form an important part of the lexicon, but to date there has been no principled way to prioritize the inclusion of such items in pedagogic materials, such as ESL/EFL textbooks or tests of vocabulary knowledge. While word lists have been used for decades, they have only provided information about individual word forms and the *Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000). They addressed this deficiency by presenting the *PHRASal Expressions List (PHRASE List)*, a list of the 505 most frequent non-transparent multiword expressions in English, intended especially for receptive use. They further explained the rationale and development of the list, as well as its compatibility with British National Corpus single-word frequency lists. Finally, they hoped that the PHRASE List will provide a basis for the systematic integration of multiword lexical items into teaching materials, vocabulary tests, and learning syllabuses.

Additionally, Zyzik (2011) examined the acquisition of Spanish idioms in a classroom setting that was supplemented with explicit instruction over a 10-week period. Her research design manipulated two variables: prior lexical knowledge and idiom organization. Sixty-five second language (L2) learners completed pre- and post-tests that measured their ability to recognize and produce the target idioms, as well as a vocabulary test to control for lexical knowledge. Participants in the experimental groups received contextualized idiom presentation that encouraged noticing, retrieving, and generating. The results indicated significant treatment effects, although no significant advantage was found for the thematic grouping of idioms. The results also showed a significant effect for prior lexical knowledge on one of the dependent variables. She discussed these findings in relation to prior studies of idiom learning from a cognitive linguistics perspective as well as psycholinguistic studies that emphasize the salience of literal meanings.

To say more, as Eerdmans and Candia (2007) cite it, conversation analysis research on naturally occurring NS-NS talk-in-interaction has revealed that participants observably orient to shared expectations of the socio-interactive role of idiomatic expressions, particularly with regard to topic termination and transition. They analyzed NS-NNS, as well as NS-NS, spontaneous conversation in order to evaluate and uncover recurrent features associated with the use of such expressions. Two main sequential patterns have been observed: one, occurring in both NS-NS and NS-NNS talk, is connected with topic termination and transition, in some (NS-NS) cases being extended to allow for the negotiation of interactional alignment between participants; the other, a ‘negotiative metatalk sequence’ follows idiomatic

expressions at points of possible topic conclusion and deals with NS-NNS trouble spots in which conversational participants' lack of shared understanding triggers coordinated negotiatory action that clears the way for the introduction of a new topic.

Ultimately, Boers et al. (2007) believe that instead of being completely arbitrary, the meaning of many idioms is 'motivated' by their original literal usage. In an FLT context, this offers the possibility of presenting idioms in ways that promote insightful learning rather than 'blind' memorization. Associating an idiom with its etymology has been shown to enhance retention. This effect seems in accordance with Dual Coding theory, as the etymological association is likely to call up a mental image of a concrete scene which can be stored in memory alongside the verbal form. They investigated the possibility of taking this technique beyond 'mere' mnemonics. They reported a series of experiments that were set up with the participation of students of English in higher education. The results revealed that knowledge of the origin of idioms can effectively help learners comprehend their figurative meaning. Not only does the problem-solving task of inferring idiomatic meaning on the basis of etymological information appear feasible, it seems to facilitate recall, too, as predicted by Levels-of-processing theory in general. Finally, their findings suggested that knowledge of the origin of certain idioms can help learners estimate whether they might be typical of informal discourse.

## METHODOLOGY

For this analytic library research, a comprehensive review of literature was done on the internet and library sources and most of the available physical and virtual sources were reviewed. The physical sources were dominantly obtained from Yazd libraries, central Iran. As this was an analytic study, no experimental or quasi-experimental design of any kind was considered.

## DISCUSSION

The present paper employed an analytic metalinguistic approach to dealing with the issue of idioms, their problematic areas, the appropriacy and correctness of their use in communicative situations, and the like while sticking to the fundamentals of idioms metalinguistically, that is, the author made use of an idiomatic language and diction to elucidate and explicate the idioms themselves. The author made an attempt to present his ideas and concepts under the titles below: Introduction· Do Idioms Really Call the Shot? Are Idioms Teachable? Where and When to Use Idioms?

## Do idioms really call the shot?

It is an undeniable point of fact that idioms put most learners of English through their paces as the former seems to crop up without rhyme or reason. You see? Even an elementary paper concerning idioms cannot be totally bereft of them, so to speak! Issues can significantly be handled more easily when we come to learning fundamentals of the language: the ABC's of syntax, some sophisticated or advanced lexical items, so elaborate constructions such as inversion, conversion, etc. Nothing daunted! But as soon as language learners cross the threshold of First Certificate or Proficiency in English, they commence to quail at the prospect of dealing with phrases whose meaning is at odds with the meaning of the words comprising them! They may hear (Fatemi, 1994): "*The car cost him an arm and a leg; Get off my back! I need to bone up on my English; She is very brainy. He is such a scatter brain; Stop being so cheeky!, ...*" In fact, they may burn large amounts of ATP to decode them. As for teachers, it seems as if they would be better off without them. Well, on reflection, this might stand to reason. As Thanasoulas (2005) says, "by virtue of there being a great, overwhelming difficulty on the student's as well as on the teacher's part in tackling indisputably "*thorny*" and abstruse idioms, many books may have baffled those who aspire to familiarize themselves with what is called '*a problematic area*". Either by providing lists of idiomatic phrases with no explanations or contexts of any kind, or by exemplifying instances that do not sufficiently illustrate the meaning of each idiom, a lot of dictionaries and reference books contrive to "*inundate*" learners with seemingly trivial and frustrating phrases and expressions rather than guide them on how and when to use them. To this end, an effective treatment of idioms should provide the correct semantic, pragmatic, and linguistic framework, that is, context, and co-text, thereby highlighting the magnitude, caliber, and "*merit*" of each idiom. In this way, the learner becomes conversant with many ways of saying the same thing, and does not revert to using common standard language.

## Are idioms teachable?

How do we set about teaching idioms? Are they teachable? Explaining to a language learner that "*to kick the bucket*" means *to die* or *to feather one's nest* means *to grow rich by taking advantage of circumstances* (Bromberg and Gordon, 2005) is like trying to teach statistics without a whiteboard! It seems to me more of a forlorn hope than a full-fledged teaching strategy. According to the author's own lights, what is needed is simple, albeit of paramount importance: *context*. I wonder and wander about why we have flouted and overlooked

this significant parameter. If a student uses a syntactic structure incorrectly or commits another error, such as “*I wonder where is she*” instead of “*I wonder where she is*”, the teacher hasten to correct him/her. Why is it that the very same, punctilious teacher underscores idioms and their correct framework? Is it because s/he rates linguistic competence higher than communicative competence and performance? We would be sorry that we cannot hold out how much hope of mastering a language by dint of linguistic competence alone. True as it is, all these hordes of linguistically competent speakers are thwarted in their aspirations the very first time they engage in conversation with a native speaker. Once again, context is the cornerstone and remedy. Let us see why this is so.

Imagine that in this attempt to explain the idiomatic phrase, *to bite the dust*, your teacher comes out with something like this:

*Bite/kiss/lick the dust = die or cease to function or exist (slang)*

A “perspicacious” learner may understand that parallel to the phrase *to bite the dust*, he can use *to kiss the dust* and *to lick the dust*, as well. Furthermore, s/he is acquainted with the semantic meaning of the idiom: *die or cease to function or exist*. What about its pragmatic meaning? Who or what dies or ceases to function or exist and when? Are any of these elements provided in any way by means of this explanation? Not by a long chalk, one would explain. Certainly not, I would say. Well, the word slang, may ambiguously provide one with part of the pragmatic component of the meaning of the phrase, yet its construction falls short of its goal. The befuddled learner may come to realize that this expression cannot be applied to formal situations but s/he is still groping in the dark. Equipped with this knowledge, how would the poor learner of English idioms use this phrase in his own example? It is flagrantly clear that he would rather go out for a walk than subject himself to this ordeal. Who is to blame, really: The teacher, the student, or the book? That is anybody’s guess!

What if the book or the teacher provided an example in order to illustrate the meaning of this phrase? Let us see how:

*“Our old fridge has finally kissed the dust! It’s about time we bought a new one!” or “A hundred warriors licked the dust in the battlefield.”*

Now the student nods in approval. He has the necessary data in order to discern the meaning of a phrase he has never seen or heard before. He can see that what kisses the dust can be an old fridge as well as a hundred warriors in battlefield. He is not reduced to brooding over the meaning. He can make an educated guess. One could adduce thousands of examples. The fact remains

that we cannot teach idioms-and language in general-without taking context into consideration, without embedding language in its social context.

### Where and when to use idioms

What has to be drawn, at this juncture, to the student’s attention is the need to note that idioms should, by no means, be used in all contexts and discourses, written or oral. When correctly used, idioms provide one with a native-like proficiency to communicate at a more advanced level and in situations that are less readily manageable. When used inadvertently, and at random where more formal and literary diction is required, they pose a great danger to the inexperienced user, who, consequently, runs the risk of sounding uneducated and vulgar. Idioms are meant to be used metaphorically and only in conversing with people with whom one shares experiences, sociocultural background, and even religious beliefs. In Thansoulas’ terms (ibid), according to their level of appropriateness and correctness, idioms are marked with formal, informal, not formal, colloquial, and slang, as shown in the example above.

### Conclusion

In sum, the author would like to ask the student, as well as the teacher, on whom it is incumbent to encourage the former to view idioms from a positive perspective- to believe that the English language is only a part of- or rather the “embodiment” of- English culture and history, which, by and large, are at variance with those of Greece. Therefore, any attempt to view things and notions from the English perspective without first mastering any other language features and components, that is, advanced grammar constructions, more elevated vocabulary, etc., but with the sole aid of idioms, is, if not futile, certainly rather painstaking and unrewarding. Idioms are meant to give the language a more lively hue, not to replace standard English thoroughly. If one is already acquainted with literary forms and expressions, there is no other way of “grasping” idioms but through contending oneself with magazines and tabloids, the informal register of which allows of the use of innumerable idiomatic expressions. By the same token, whoever wishes to learn English or any other language should not limit themselves to reading books taught at school, but also acquire a taste for classical and modern literature, religious and philosophical books, newspapers, etc. to understand:

*“He really ate it on the test; The boss fired him because he could not cut the mustard; There they are, floor it! After ten years of service, they gave him the boot; If I were in your shoes, I would fire him; I think you have got*

*a hole in your head; Just keep a stiff upper lip; She has a nose for finding bargains; They are going toe-to-toe again; I hear you have a bun in the oven! ...”*

Whatever one opts to do, the author hopes that this article will come in handy.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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