



## ENGLISH IDIOMS IN USE

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Fixed and idiomatic expressions of various kinds have long preoccupied language teachers. Publishers often devote special supplementary teaching materials to them and produce impressive special dictionaries of idioms aimed at language learners (e.g. Cowie and Mackin, 1975; Longman, 1979). And yet, compared with the amount of research into distribution and use that other formal types have been subjected to in recent years and the resultant improved descriptions that have come from data-based enquiries, we still seem to know little about how idioms are actually used in speech and writing and what their natural contexts are. This paper attempts to look at some natural contexts of use and to examine what sorts of functions idioms perform within those contexts.

By *idioms* here I mean strings of more than one word whose syntactic form is to a greater or lesser degree fixed and whose semantics is opaque, also to a greater or lesser degree. This definition, combining syntactic frozenness with semantic opacity, enables us to incorporate within the term 'idiom' a wide range of fixed expressions, including the tournure idioms (see below) which are most often focused upon in language teaching materials, phrasal verbs, a variety of other formal types, cultural allusions, restricted collocations and extended metaphors. These will be illustrated and commented on below.

### 2. FIXEDNESS AND OPACITY

All languages contain expressions which are fixed in varying degrees. Fixedness may be established according to the criteria of *potential for* subjection to the following operations: (a) addition, (b) deletion, (c) transposition and (d) substitution. If we take the example of the English expression *to hit below the belt* (meaning to attack or criticise someone cruelly and unfairly), we find its potential for the four operations is limited:

(a) Addition: No elements may be added: 'she hit *hard* below the belt' sounds odd or rather marked, as does 'he hit below the *leather* belt', this latter suggesting a literal, non-idiomatic interpretation. It is important to note that the idiomatic interpretation is bound up with conventional use of *form*.

(b) Deletion: all elements must be present: 'You're hitting now' would be difficult to interpret as a synonym of *hit below the belt*. This is not to say that ellipted forms of fixed expressions never occur (see 7 below), but, as with all ellipsis, a high degree of shared knowledge is assumed.

(c) Transposition: Elements may not normally be transposed, or transposition may be strictly limited to certain types. *Hit below the belt* allows for limited nominalisation ('that was really a case of hitting below the belt' seems perfectly normal), but not passivisation (\*'the belt was hit below several times').

(d) Substitution: lexical and grammatical substitutes may not normally be used: 'hit below the sash' may not act as a synonym; 'she hit below it' may not substitute for the full nominal form.

Other fixed expressions may display more or less potential for the four operations. *To pass the buck* (meaning to pass the responsibility to someone else) allows for nominalisation *and* passivisation ('the buck was passed from person to person'); on the other hand, *kick the bucket* (meaning to die) allows for little or no movement at all in most operations (\*'she kicked the pail'; \*'the bucket's been kicked by my old uncle'), but is often reduced to 'old Fred kicked *it* long ago' in highly informal contexts. So fixedness varies along different dimensions, but is usually present in some form in idiomatic expressions.

Opacity also varies: *to talk shop* (meaning to talk about one's work when in an inappropriate situation) is more opaque in isolation than *to talk politics*, which is almost completely transparent (see McCarthy, 1990: 9 for further discussion). Opacity is also acutely subject to context, and what might be an opaque expression in isolation may be easy to decode given contextual cues.

Types of expressions displaying the kinds of fixedness we have described abound in modern English. The most common types seem to be (see also Alexander, 1978; 1984) the following:

1. Tournures: constructions with *verb + object* or *verb + adjunct*: *pull somebody's leg* (Spanish *tomar el pelo*); *go off one's head*.
2. Phrasal verbs: *take somebody off* (meaning to mimic them).
3. Binomials and trinomials: usually irreversible combinations with *and* or other conjunctions whose order may vary from language to language: *black and white* film (cf. Spanish *blanco y negro*), *ready, willing and able*, *give or take a few*, *rough and ready*.
4. Frozen similes; usually identified by the removability of the first *as*: *(as) keen as mustard*, *(as) cold as charity*.
5. Possessive 's phrases: *a king's ransom*, *the cat's whiskers*.
6. Opaque compounds: *blackmail*, *a mish-mash*, *the back of beyond*.

7. Conversational routines; fixed expressions very frequent in spoken data, including phrasal discourse markers: *by the way, how d'you do, that's that, mind you*.
8. Restricted collocations; collocations that are so predictable that the collocation forms a unit: *breakneck speed, top secret, auburn hair/curls/tresses*, but not *\*auburn car*.
9. Cultural allusions; these include quotations, slogans, catchphrases, proverbs, all instantly identifiable to those who share the cultural context: *to be or not to be ...* (cf. Spanish *En un lugar de la Mancha ...*), *sock it to me, every cloud has a silver lining*.

### 3. IDIOMS ACROSS DATA

All of the types of fixed expression listed above may be found in greater or lesser number in real data, but it is with the more conventional notion of idioms, the tournure-type constructions of category 1. in the list, that we shall begin our investigation here. As formal and semantic types, they are well described in the literature, where discussion centres usually upon the semantics, the syntax, the cross-linguistic differences and the universality of such expressions (e.g. see Makkai, 1978; Fernando and Flavel, 1981). What is often lacking is an attempt to examine function and distribution in real data of such forms. Conversational routines and discourse markers are a notable exception (see Coulmas, 1979; 1981; Schiffrin, 1987). There is an underlying assumption that idiomatic expressions are merely rather informal or colloquial alternatives to their nearest synonymous literal free-forms. This may well be true inasmuch as the kinds of data where idioms abound reflect a high degree of informality at the interpersonal level between speaker/writer and listener/reader, but this does not go anywhere near far enough to tell us why a speaker/writer might choose an idiom instead of its literal counterpart at any point in a discourse.

One of the major areas of progress in recent years in discourse analysis has been the exploration and description of links between linguistic form and discourse function. This has been particularly true in the case of grammatical form (e.g. see the papers in Monaghan, 1987; see also McCarthy, 1991: Chapter 2 for a survey of grammar and discourse). Studies of the distribution of tense and aspect forms, for example, have shown that tense and aspect selection are sensitive to discourse structure and the context of interaction (see McCarthy and Carter, in progress, Chapter 3). If we could similarly establish a significant correlation between the occurrence of idioms and features of the discourse, we might go some way towards understanding one of the most interesting questions concerning vocabulary choice: why should languages 'duplicate' ways of saying things, offering the literal and idiomatic options that seem to operate theoretically at least, at many many places in a discourse? The place occupied by idioms in syllabuses and in the vocabulary learning process, I have already suggested, is usually rather unsatisfactorily dealt with, in description and in practical materials; idioms either become just a 'fun' element of the syllabus, something for Friday afternoon, or else learners who misuse them have to be warned that they are incredibly difficult to use and are best consigned to the receptive vocabulary. In most cases idioms are considered to be relevant only to the higher levels or final

stages of language courses, or are often tossed into the black hole of 'supplementary' materials by publishers. Advice to teachers in teacher-training manuals and other literature is often, quite forgivably, vague. Gairns and Redman's (1986) review of vocabulary teaching concludes that the unquestioned enthusiasm learners show for grappling with idioms should be focused upon those idioms which are 'useful' and which can dovetail naturally into the learner's productive vocabulary (p. 36). Gairns and Redman are right, however, to point up the inadequacy of morphological and 'semantic field' approaches to idioms (*ibid.*).

One area of vocabulary description that has succeeded in matching form and function is the study of the role of certain words in *signalling* discourse patterns (see McCarthy, 1991: Chapter 3 for a survey). Linguists such as Winter (1977), Hoey (1983) and Jordan (1984) have shown how certain items regularly signal to the reader how a text will pattern on the macro-level. Common, everyday patterns such as the PROBLEM-SOLUTION pattern (where a problem is identified within a situation, responses are evaluated and a solution identified by positive evaluation of a response) may be explicitly signalled by their producers using such vocabulary as *problem, issue, dilemma, response, reaction, answer*. Thus one potential area for looking for correlations might be to see if idioms play any role in signalling macro-patterns. Let us examine a textual sample in which the typical PROBLEM-SOLUTION pattern is realised. The extract is from an advertisement for a professional association for photographers known as BFP, which appeared in the magazine *Practical Photography* (April 1992: 103). The headline of the advertisement clearly signals the pattern of the text: HOW BFP MEMBERSHIP CAN HELP SOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS. There then follow details of what services BFP membership offers and the text concludes:

If you ever experience difficulties in getting payment for a particular picture, we'll gladly take up the cudgels on your behalf. The BFP is well known in the publishing world, and has an excellent track record in recovering unpaid fees for members.

The extract contains two notable occurrences of idioms: *take up the cudgels* and *have a track record*. Both items may be labelled here as broad signals of the problem-solution pattern (as opposed to being topic-specific): *take up the cudgels* is a strongly evaluative synonym of *respond* (to a problem), and *have a track record* is a clear signal of the *evaluation* function itself which lies at the heart of the PROBLEM-SOLUTION pattern. Further examples and discussion of this relationship between signalling the macro-pattern and the occurrence of idioms may be found in McCarthy and Carter, in press, Chapter 3. The point is that not all of the many places where an idiom might have been selected do have idioms; the choice seems in this extract to correspond to the segments of the text which signal the text's overall pattern.

Examples such as the extract above do admittedly raise problems concerning the borderline between fully institutionalised, 'fossilised', opaque idioms and extended metaphors which are perhaps not yet fully fossilised and retain some transparency of meaning (on this fuzzy borderline see Fernando and Flavell, 1981: 44-7). But this is not the issue of our present discussion, and recent work on metaphor anyway stresses the interpersonal and evaluative functions of metaphors, so underlining their common



ground with more opaque idioms (see especially Low, 1988). Not least, the study of metaphor needs must also confront the apparent duplication of meaning in the lexicon and attempt to understand its functioning in exactly the same way as the study of idioms might do.

#### 4. EVIDENCE FOR THE EVALUATIVE FUNCTION OF IDIOMS

It is a strong claim to suggest that idioms and other non-literal lexical devices correlate with elements of textual patterns, but considerable support for this position comes from computational analysis of written texts of a wide variety of types, where the evaluative function of idioms seems to be most significant (see Moon, 1992). There is also plenty of evidence in spoken data.

One of the very few analysts to describe idiom use in naturally-occurring spoken English is Strässler (1982). Strässler does what the present paper advocates and departs from the traditional way of analysing idioms as a semantic problem and looks at the *pragmatics* of idiom use. Strässler finds that idioms are, relatively, *infrequent* (they occur on average once per 1,150 words in his data), which might immediately suggest for the learner needing to concentrate on spoken skills that they are less of a 'problem' than they are often believed to be. But when idioms do occur in the data, they do so with a high degree of predictability, not randomly. Idioms, Strässler maintains, are much more likely to occur when a speaker is saying something about a *third person* or about an *object* or other non-human entity, rather than about the speaker him/herself or about the listener(s) (p. 103). This he attributes to the evaluative function of idioms and the risks to face and interpersonal relations which can stem from the self- or other-abasement which idioms often entail (p. 103; p. 109). To say to someone 'I'm sorry to leave you twiddling your thumbs' (instead of 'I'm sorry to keep you waiting/to waste your time') expresses a certain dominance and confidence on the part of the speaker and a potential offence and loss of face to the listener which the alternative non-idiom renditions seem to obviate. Strässler's data, therefore, point very much in the direction of the present paper: the potential for the integration of levels between lexical form, communicative function (to include interpersonal elements such as politeness and face), mode (e.g. spoken versus written), text-type (e.g. PROBLEM-SOLUTION) and genre (the kind of activity engaged in and its associated linguistic forms).

#### 5. THE EVALUATIVE FUNCTION IN NARRATIVE

We shall find support for Strässler's conclusions in the data which follow, and we may go one step further. I shall try to illustrate that idioms occur with the interpersonal restrictions suggested by Strässler *and* in a definable relationship with certain discourse-types and genres. As the main vehicle for our examples, we shall turn to *oral narrative* as a clearly defined genre with an identifiable discourse structure

(see Labov, 1972), and we shall observe that idioms do seem to occur at significant junctures in orally performed stories, not just randomly. Idioms in narrative data often occur in segments where the teller is *evaluating* the events of the narrative. *Evaluation* here refers to Labov's (1972) notion of the necessary function whereby story-tellers make the events they are telling worth listening to. Evaluative clauses in narratives forestall the question 'So what?' ('Why should I want to listen to this story?' 'What's exciting/special/funny about it?'). Evaluation is not an optional extra in story-telling; without it there is no story, only a bland report. Idioms also occur in *codas* (again in Labov's sense; the coda, at the end of a story, provides a 'bridge' between the story world and the real world of the teller and listeners). Here are some examples from real spoken data, with idioms underlined:

1. [Speaker A is telling a story about her very old dog]

A: He's sixteen, he's very geriatric.

B: Yeah, our dog was really ill.

A: I thought he was going to die actually. It would have been awful, actually, just to see, to see him *peg out* on the kitchen floor (laughs).

(data courtesy of Lucy Cruttenden, 1988)

2. [Speaker A has just told of a series of calamities he experienced on a recent holiday; first speaker B comments on the events]

B: Still, pretty horrendous, though.

A: Oh, it was very unsettling, ... still, so many other unsettling factors *I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels that day*.

(author's own data, 1989)

These two examples show idioms correlating with elements of the narrative pattern. In the first sample, 'It would have been awful, actually, ...', with its conditional tense is a typical *comparator* in Labov's terms, where the teller evaluates actual events by comparing them with a possible world; it is in this 'possible' evaluative segment the idiom occurs, and it is predicated upon a non-human, non-present entity (the dog). In the second sample, the idiom evaluates the whole situation, and acts as a *coda*, summarising all the events and referring to 'that day' (as opposed to the 'this day' of the teller and listeners). But here the idiom refers to the *first* person (the teller). Personal oral narrative is a genre in which speakers often tell tales that evaluate and abase *themselves* (for humour, to create social solidarity, to increase informality, intimacy, etc.), and so we should not be surprised to find first person-referenced idioms in this kind of data. Moreover, as McCarthy (1991: 139-40) points out, story-telling is often a *collaborative* enterprise, and listeners have the right to evaluate events too. Here we might also expect to find idioms, but they will have to be ones that are careful not to abase the teller, unless the relationship between teller and listener(s) is very relaxed and on equal terms. In our data we do in fact find listeners evaluating in this way:

3. [The same speakers as in extract 1., later in the discourse. B is now reciprocating with a story about her old dog being put down]

B: ... she wasn't in any pain and she was as alert as ever, that was the awful thing, but her body was just *giving out*, her leg, and so my Mum said, thought, 'Right, next day'.

C: *Don't know where to draw the line*, do you?

(Lucy Cruttenden data, 1988)

Speaker B uses *giving out* ('ceasing to function') to evaluate the poor dog's situation. C also uses an idiom to evaluate the events, but refers it to the impersonal *you*, thus greatly lessening risk to face (it is worth considering the opposite effect of '*you don't know where to draw the line*' addressed as a direct second-person singular pronoun to the teller). The idiom here reflects that 'retreat or sheltering behind shared values' that Moon (1992) observes in idiom usage in her data, and suggests the importance of observing the *cultural* contexts of idioms, in the broadest sense of the word *culture*.

In the examples above, we can combine Strässler's observations on the interpersonal nature of idioms and their non-random distribution with regard to discourse patterning at higher levels. This is in parallel with statements about grammar in Section 3 of this paper. It seems that, whatever aspect of lexis and grammar we choose to look at, we cannot really separate them from the discourse-creating process. Areas traditionally thought of as belonging to semantics and syntax can be placed squarely at the centre of discourse analysis. Things that we have traditionally taught as language teachers in traditional ways - idioms are just one example, being usually approached from their morphological characteristics or from the point of view of semantic opacity - can be meaningfully re-assessed from a language-as-discourse viewpoint. We should not reject out of hand the value of syntactic and morphological approaches where these might be helpful for language learning (see McCarthy, 1990: 7). Nor should we underestimate the potential for increasing cultural awareness offered by approaches which stress the semantic universals of idioms (e.g. Makkai, 1978). And one can hardly argue against the value of examining syntactic variation as exemplified in the work of Cowie (1981) and Alexander (1978; 1984), when a language like English contains so many expressions of such varying degrees of syntactic fixedness (as well as a broad scale from complete semantic transparency to almost complete opacity). However, I do wish to propose that the study of idioms will be of *greatest* use to learners the more we know about their occurrence in discourse. The same may not be true of lexicography; the dictionary probably cannot (nor indeed should be expected to) encapsulate all the pragmatic information that a discourse analysis of idioms must take into account. However, teaching materials and classroom activities are not dictionaries or inventories, and there every attempt should be made to reflect discourse-pragmatic aspects of idiom use.



## 6. EVERYDAY SOURCES OF IDIOMS IN TEXT

We shall stay with narrative for a moment, but return to written data further to underline the argument. Teachers often face the difficult task of trying to find appropriate texts for aspects of language they wish to teach. Idioms are particularly challenging in this respect. One kind of narrative data that seems frequently to contain idioms is the popular horoscope, and, given what we have said above, this should not surprise us at all. The horoscope is a 'narrative of future time' (a kind of *irrealis* narrative if we sub-divide narratives along traditional lines); it is *your* (the reader's) narrative, (fore)told and evaluated by the astrologer. The writer has the dominant role, and may wish to inform you, warn you, encourage you, advise you, but not terrify you, insult you or alienate you. Additionally, the horoscope has to be sufficiently general to be able to apply to any reader who is of that birth sign and must not be too topic-specific. Some examples of horoscopes follow from popular magazines:

1. Nice aspects to saturn on 5 and 10 November suggest you'll *make headway* with work or study, ...

(*More* magazine, 30.10-12.11.1991: 64)

2. You're usually *free and easy* with your money, but it looks like you're determined to save for something special ... People and places you thought too dull to bother with *turn out to be a riot*.

(*ibid.*)

3. From early November you must find ways of your own to overcome obstacles or realise that they're simply not worth worrying about. *Let off steam* as you need to *wind down*.

(*ibid.*)

4. An unexpected night out with someone close will *add some colour* to your life this week.

(*Best* magazine, 14.11.1991)

5. Since the current Full Moon occurs in your own birth sign, you may well be of the opinion that it is up to others to *proffer the olive branch*.

(Patrick Walker. *Radio Times*, 24-30.8.1991: 89)

The popular personal horoscope, as a genre, is meant to be a personal conversation between reader and astrologer. It is hardly to be wondered at, then, that the genre seems to have taken to itself a high occurrence of idioms which evaluate the reader's character, the behaviour of others towards the reader, and the situations the reader will supposedly encounter. In most *popular* magazine horoscopes (though in British ones there are noticeably fewer idioms in horoscopes in the 'quality' magazines), idioms occur with a much higher frequency than Strässler's suggested figure of every

1,150 words for spoken data. In a random 300-word sample from the data collection our samples quoted above are taken from, no less than 13 idioms occur. So, not only are popular horoscopes an extraordinarily rich natural source of idioms for the language teacher but they show how vocabulary distribution is crucially dependent on *genre* and *register*.

## 7. FIXED EXPRESSIONS AND CULTURAL ALLUSIONS

Idioms of the kind we have been looking at are a good example of the extent to which lexis can place great demands on the cultural competence of the learner. Anyone looking at British English data in search of idioms, we have suggested, will find their distribution to be very uneven and closely tied to discourse-type, genre and register. Another thing they may well notice is how often idioms and other types of fixed expressions are *alluded to* rather than used in full. This may take the form of simple ellipsis of fixed elements (e.g. saying 'Oh well, every cloud', instead of the full proverb 'every cloud has a silver lining'), or may be a more oblique kind of allusion to an expression. Many common, everyday texts assume that the receiver will be able to pick up such allusions and perceive the cultural references made by them. These references are not necessarily 'cultural' in the sense of alluding to great art and literature, but in the sense that they refer to the everyday cultural life of the mass media, the deep-rooted common cultural store of allusions, proverbs, sayings, idioms, collocations and other fixed linguistic forms and belief-systems these inherently encode. Examples of the various kinds of oblique cultural reference used regularly in advertising texts, book and song titles, headlines and other sources follow, with an explanation of the cultural entity alluded to in each case:

1. Twinkle, twinkle, little tsar.  
(Headline to an article about Russia, *The Observer Review*, 10.3.1991: 56)  
Reference: children's nursery rhyme/song 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star'.
2. Dry skin. Irritation. Razor Burn. No wonder shaving's a pain in the neck.  
(Razor advertisement. *The Observer Magazine*, 10.3.1991: 53)  
Reference: idiomatic phrase: 'a pain in the neck' = an annoyance, a problem.
3. Now is the discount of our winter tents.  
(Sing advertising a winter sale of camping equipment in an outdoor leisure shop)  
Reference: Shakespeare: *King Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 1: 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York'.
4. Despite inflation, the wages of sin remain the same.  
(On a chapel noticeboard)  
Reference: The Christian Bible: 'The wages of sin is death'.
5. Junk and disorderly.  
(Sing on bric-a-brac shop)  
Reference: Legal term for a criminal offence: 'drunk and disorderly'.
6. You've never add it so good.

(Sing advertising an accountancy business)

Reference: British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in a speech: 'You've never had it so good'.

7. Spaniard in the Works

(Book title by John Lennon)

Reference: 'to throw a spanner in the works'; idiomatic expression = to disrupt a process/the progress of something.

From this random selection we can see allusions to childhood culture, to religion, to the law, to politics, to great literature and simply to everyday idioms in the language. Any reader/listener failing to pick up these references misses not only the humour but the sense of cultural solidarity, of belonging to a community with shared linguistic and cultural values that such references project. An ability to refer across discourse worlds, a type of *intertextuality*, lies at the heart of this aspect of lexical competence. For the discourse analyst it suggests a widespread penetration of everyday culture into the way we express ourselves and the ultimate impossibility of a theory of language in use that attempts to separate culture from linguistic expression. It is conceivable that, on the most banal level, culture-free versions of natural languages can be created for survival-level communication or for very restricted registers (for example the role of English as *lingua franca* in international business and academic communication, what might be called a purely *transactional* level), but languages as they are naturally used by human beings for communication are highly *interactional* and probably cannot exist without reference to common cultural norms and without exploiting the potential for creativity those norms offer.

## 8. CONCLUSION

What the present short study shows is two things:

- (1) Idioms do not occur randomly in data merely as alternatives to more literal ways of saying things. Rather, they seem to occur at significant points in the creation of discourse structures, have important evaluative roles, and are extremely sensitive to interpersonal concerns such as face. What is more, their distribution is more concentrated in some genres than in others.
- (2) Idioms and other fixed expressions are regularly used as anchors in the interface between language and culture, and may often be found alluded to indirectly rather than used directly in their full form. When they lurk beneath the surface of discourse this may place a considerable cultural burden on the lexical competence of the non-native speaker.

What these two points seem to suggest is that second language teaching should not ignore idioms and other fixed expressions or treat them as some sort of icing on the cake, or as some frivolous addendum to the real business of learning a language,

but should bring them into the centre of language learning and look at them again, very hard indeed.

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