

## HUNTING FOR THE MEANING OF AN IDIOM: A VICIOUS CIRCLE?

**Katja Mäntylä**, University of Jyväskylä

This abstract discusses some characteristics of English idioms and their relationship to idiom recognition and comprehension among Finnish advanced learners of English and native speakers. The conclusion is that even at the advanced level, NNSs do not necessarily possess sufficient tools for understanding idioms, and therefore, in teaching the attention ought to be paid on idiom characteristics, rather than on meanings of single idioms.

**Keywords:** idioms, English, SLA

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this abstract is to introduce a study on English idioms from the point of view of language users, both native and non-native. I shall pay particular attention to idiom characteristics and their effect on the performance of the informants.

There has been quite a lot of debate on the definition of an idiom, yet no agreement has been reached. The more tolerant definitions include fairly fixed, idiomatic expressions like proverbs and sayings, whereas the more 'puritanical' view accepts only completely non-variable, fixed metaphorical utterances as idioms (see e.g. Moon 1998, 2–5). In this study, an idiom refers to an expression which consists of two or more words, and whose meaning is different from the sum of the literal meanings of its constituents, e.g. *kill two birds with one stone*.

Despite a clear definition, it is sometimes very difficult to decide whether an expression really is an idiom, or some other type of idiomatic expression, for instance, a saying, or a collocation. The lines between the categories are fuzzy, and the metaphoricity and idiomaticity of an idiom are

sometimes in the eye of the definer. The meaning of an idiom is not too effortlessly detected either, and this may pose problems to language users, particularly to non-native speakers (NNSs). While metaphoricity/figurativeness is the key feature of an idiom, there are several other factors affecting their recognition and comprehension. Idioms tolerate a fair amount of transformability. There are completely frozen idioms that do not allow any transformations, but a number of idioms allow, for instance, variation in tense, word order, or wording. Idioms also differ from each other as to their structures: idioms might be dressed up as verb phrases, adverb phrases, noun phrases etc. Naturally, like any items of vocabulary, idioms also differ from each other as to their frequency and familiarity. When it comes to NNSs, the mother tongue cannot be bypassed either, as the role it plays is noticeable. (e.g. Cronk & Schweigert 1993, Fernando 1996, Gibbs 1990, 1992, Kövecses & Szabo 1996, McGlone et al. 1994).

## **2 THE STUDY**

In vocabulary studies, idioms and the foreign language learner are off the beaten field as there are only a few studies on non-native adults (see Arnaud & Savignon 1997, Irujo 1986a, 1986b, 1993). These studies have shown that more opaque idioms and those that do not have an equivalent in the learners' mother tongue, are the most difficult ones. All studies take for granted that idioms ought to be taught to NNSs, but there has been disagreement on which idioms to teach, those with a similar equivalent in the learner's mother tongue (Irujo), or those that are opaque and have no equivalent in the learner's native language (Arnaud & Savignon). One suggested reason for the lack of idiom research in second language learning has been the minor role idioms play in language teaching. In schools, idioms are not often noticed, perhaps not even mentioned. Yet, idioms are frequently used, and therefore it is necessary to look at how NNSs perceive them, not just how 'well' they have studied and know single idioms. It is also worthwhile to examine how diverse native speakers (NSs) are in their interpretations, as a single idiom can carry several figurative meanings.

In a study with 144 Finnish and 36 British university students as the informants, I investigated language users' awareness and comprehension of English idioms. The non-natives all studied English either as their first or second subject; therefore they could be considered as advanced learners. They also used English almost daily.

The data were gathered through an idiom questionnaire. The idioms were presented out of context to ensure as many interpretations as possible. Originally, the idioms were randomly taken from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995) that is corpus-based and in which the idioms are marked according to their frequencies. In the final version of the questionnaire, there were 45 idioms altogether, representing 3 different frequency categories. Both transformable and frozen idioms were represented, and, more importantly, idioms that had a full equivalent, similar equivalent, or no equivalent in Finnish were equally represented. Each idiom had 4 alternative interpretations, 1–3 of which were correct. The majority of the idioms were, to an extent, transparent, and only a few were considered as totally opaque, that is, not even the image created by their literal meaning hinted at the idiom's meaning. Furthermore, there was a blank space for possible additional meanings the informants thought were missing, or any other alterations or comments they wanted to make<sup>1</sup>. In writing the meaning alternatives, I also consulted *Longman* (1979) and *Oxford* (1983) idiom dictionaries.

### 3 TROUBLEMAKERS

The meaning of an idiom has often been claimed to be arbitrary. This, however, is not true. Even a quick glance at an idiom etymology dictionary is enough to suggest that the origins of numerous idioms lie in some real event or situation that the idiom describes literally. It is true that the origins of metaphoricity may be so far back in history that they are hard to detect nowadays, as the literal meaning contains no clue as to the figurative connotation. Due to this, there are bound to be unfamiliar, totally arbitrary and thus incomprehensible idioms in a language as well (Lakoff 1987, 451). For instance, *baker's dozen* is not transparent today. *Dozen* does give a hint that the idiom refers to a number but whether bakers are too liberal or stingy in their counting may remain a mystery to a language user.

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<sup>1</sup> An example of an item in the questionnaire:

**throw off balance**

- a) lose one's money in unwise investments
- b) trip or push someone so that they fall
- c) make someone change their opinion
- d) suddenly confuse or surprise someone
- e) \_\_\_\_\_

In the light of the results of the present study, the informants were not quite certain what an idiom is and how it should be approached. If they did not know the meaning, they seem to have been tricked by the literal meaning of single words, thus failing to notice the metaphorical message and the whole. Idioms seem to have been perceived as expressions similar to any clauses or sentences. Particularly the NNSs suffered from this, since they did not know too many idioms and had to rely on alternative methods in understanding them. A popular strategy among the NNSs was to pick one word in the idiom and then find a Finnish idiom with the same word in it e.g. *let the cat out of the bag - nostaa kissa pöydälle (talk about a troublesome issue that has been avoided), be home and dry - olla kuivilla (solve or escape from a difficult situation)*. The effect of Finnish was obvious also in false friends, e.g. *jump out of your skin* was interpreted as *hypätä nahoistaan (be infuriated)*. As a group, the NNSs were quite heterogeneous. Presumably, they knew fewer idioms than the natives and were thus compelled to conclude or guess the meaning. This also showed in the high number of clearly wrong alternatives chosen.

Very often the literal meaning or the image it created would have helped the informants in figuring out the metaphorical meaning, had they been familiar with the nature of idioms. Knowing the etymology of an idiom is not essential, as it is far more vital to look at the idiom as a whole. It is not sufficient only to figure out the (literal) meaning of the individual words. For instance, *voting with one's feet* is incomprehensible if one first thinks of the act of voting and then one's feet, without perceiving the connection of these two in the expression. But thinking of someone leaving the place as a demonstration of their opinion does help in figuring out the meaning.

The native speakers in the study naturally did not have similar problems with the meanings. Therefore, the main aim was to see how unanimous they would be in their interpretations. The NSs often chose only one alternative even though there were several "correct" ones. Although they were more homogeneous than the NNSs, they did differ in their choice i.e. interpreted idioms differently since they were perhaps familiar with them in a particular context. The frequency of the idioms did not seem to affect this. The NSs disagreed, for example, about the accurate meaning of *pull a face*, *get into one's stride* and *cook the books*, to name but a few. The NSs were also confused by idioms close to the target, for instance *bring home - bring home the bacon*.

Not surprisingly, both groups had problems with less frequent expressions (*take an early bath; a paper tiger*), and with idioms with their origins in a special language (*kick something into touch*). The latter group

in particular sometimes makes the hunting for the meaning of an idiom painful since without knowing the original special vocabulary or reference, the meaning is likely to remain a mystery. If one knows what kicking the ball into touch in sports means, also the metaphorical meaning of this expression becomes clear. However, sports terminology in general is perhaps not the most useful thing for an average non-native learner, as even all native speakers are not familiar with various special vocabularies. Therefore, it is hardly a surprise that idioms like this cause problems in understanding.

#### 4 HELPING HANDS

When looking at the relationship between the literal and figurative meanings of idioms, the more transparent idioms were among the easiest ones. If the literal meaning of an idiom made sense and was close to the figurative meaning, the NNSs had little difficulty in recognising the meaning, e.g. *give the green light, throw off balance*.

With regard to the non-natives, however, the mother tongue played a more significant role, as also earlier studies in the field have shown. Although it was also misleading in some cases, Finnish was of valuable assistance. Expressions that had a similar equivalent in Finnish, whether literal or not, were the easiest ones, e.g. *pull strings - vetää (oikeista) naruista, smell the rat - haistaa palaneen käryä*. In general, relying too heavily on one's native language does have its dangers: false friends, idioms similar in form but different in meaning, may lead into difficulty. Although the mother tongue and its effect on the comprehension of second language expressions cannot be underestimated, it should be borne in mind that the effect is not always positive.

#### 5 NUTSHELL

The non-native informants in this study faced a two-fold problem: firstly, they seemed to be unfamiliar with both the nature of idioms and with the idioms in the questionnaire. The natives knew most idioms in the questionnaire, thus their results did not dramatically reflect the problem with the nature of the idioms. The NNSs did not know enough of idioms in general and they failed to comprehend unfamiliar expressions. The only tools they possessed were relying on the literal meaning of single words

and on their mother tongue. They did not see idioms as entities but as word strings consisting of separate words. Therefore, they were not able to approach the meaning via the image the expression creates.

Students' helplessness in front of idioms is not surprising. After filling in the questionnaire, a number of informants commented that idioms had not been paid attention to at school or university, and were difficult to understand. Some students even wrote in their comments that the nature of the tested expressions was odd and it was impossible to know how to approach unfamiliar ones and this did not make the task any easier. Since idioms in all their complexity and diversity also follow certain structure and logic, the awareness of their existence and knowledge of their nature could easily be raised. Moreover, idioms are frequently used in the language, and at least recognising them is quite essential to a second language learner.

In this study, no transformations of idioms were included. However, idioms are frequently transformed and adapted according to the context and this may hinder recognition, let alone comprehension. Grammatical transformations do not alter the meaning of an idiom, but lexical variations are also common, and they often add to the meaning even if they do not change it altogether. Also, particularly newspapers seem to adjust idioms in their headlines or use them as such in both literal and metaphorical meaning. If a Russian president, feeling unwell, is said to *put on brave face to meet French leader*, the metaphorical aspect may easily be left unnoticed by a non-native, although this kind of double meaning is a perfect example of the meaning of an idiom being highly motivated and also easy to figure out once the expressions are recognised as idioms.

Finally, there are expressions that may carry either a literal or idiomatic meaning, depending on the context. A person literally *lost in the woods* will not be delighted if his or her state is comprehended figuratively. On the other hand, an expression may carry both meanings simultaneously as the above example of the Russian president shows. This multiplicity of meanings adds to the complex nature of idioms. Therefore, knowing idioms and being able to produce them is, to my mind, not that essential, but knowing their characteristics and recognising them in a text is. That is also what ought to be taught to non-native speakers.

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