

## Idiomatic Expressions in English

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### 1- Abstract

One of the most important aspects of language is idioms. They are frequently used in a wide variety of situations, from friendly conversations to a more formal conversations and written contexts.

Every language in the world has its own idioms. In English itself, idioms play an important role in everyday life linguistic events. People often hear idioms everyday in daily conversations, on television, radio, magazine, newspaper, etc.

This graduation research provides a review and discussion of the concept of idiomatic expressions and its different occurrences in English and Arabic languages. Attention is paid to establishing the similarities and differences between idioms and other linguistic structures, including metaphor and metonymy. Also, consideration is given to the literal and figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions. Finally, the relationship between idioms, context and culture is highlighted.

### 2- Definition of idiomatic expressions

Many attempts have been made to define the term ‘idiomatic expression’ (e.g. Katz and Postal, 1963: 275; Fraser, 1970: 22; Makkia 1972: 23; Kövecses and Szabó, 1996: 326) all stress, especially, Kövecses and Szabó (1996: 326), that the meaning of an idiomatic expression is indirect and cannot be deduced purely by reference to the meaning of its lexical components since idioms are “linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of their constituent parts”.

Domyati (2009) provides two examples:

( كل يجر الى النار قرصه )

Literally means that (everybody drags fire to their own loaf of bread) i.e., everyone looks after their own interests

However, in the previous example, it is clear that the intended meaning is completely different from the literal meaning. This characteristic of idiomatic expressions means that they often pose difficulties when

attempts are made to render them into other languages (Al-Qassimi, 1979: 18- 19; Davies, 1982: 68; Husam Al-Din, 1985: 125; Al-Hamzawi, 2000: 28).

Other definitions have also emphasized that the structure of an idiomatic expression follows the structure of the language in which it was originally coined. Consequently, idioms may be as long as a sentence or as short as a clause or phrase (Hockett, 1958: 172; Katz and Postal, 1963: 360; Abu-Saad, 1987: 10). With reference to Arabic, Al-Anbar (2001: 2) specifies the length as consisting of two words or more.

Katz and Postal (1963: 275-276) argue that even polymorphic words, such as telephone or greenhouse, constitute a type of idiom which they refer to as “lexical idioms” (see also Hockett, 1958: 172; Liu, 2008: 4-5). Jaeger’s (1999: 246) definition identifies several different aspects of idiomatic expressions, referring to them as “collectively coined imaginative utterances of two or more words but usually under sentence-length”.

He maintains that these utterances are “based on a range of figurative patterns aimed at achieving specific sound and sense effects” and that they are “linguistic signs in their own right”. Idiomatic expressions are also characterized by means of relative degree of fixedness.

According to Fraser (1970: 22) the most important features of idiomatic expressions are conventional common usages in a limited formula in each particular linguistic usage (see 2.5.2). Moreover, idiomatic expressions can be characterized by metonymy and metaphorical meaning, but may also have specific characteristics in their structures which helps to differentiate them from metaphors or figurative meaning. Their conventional meaning also arises from language speakers who approve the meaning of an idiomatic expression (Davies, 1982:69; Nunberg et al., 1994: 496- 498).

According to Husam Al-Din (1985: 19) an idiom is: a fixed mode of expression in a particular language. It consists of a word or more whose meaning has been transformed from a literal one to another one agreed upon by linguists.

For Al-Hamzawi (2000, 28) it is a particular, fixed mode of speech, marked by its metaphorical and untranslatable nature, studied as one linguistic unit according to specific linguistic rules that may agree with or differ from general linguistic rules. Amongst all the many definitions of the term ‘idiomatic expression’, Crystal (2008: 237) provides one of the most detailed and specific, describing it as: A term used in grammar and

lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which are semantically or syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit.

From a semantic viewpoint, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed up to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts.

### 3- An overview of idiomatic expressions

When we use language, we structure it in a way that complies with the structural system peculiar to that language. Sinclair (1991) argues that there are two models which can be used to explain the meaning of a language text, namely, the Open Choice Principle and the Idiom Principle. The former, which describes language in terms of ‘slot-and-filler’ modes, views language text as the result of a large number of complex open choices made at each point where a unit is completed.

The text is viewed, therefore, as a series of slot nodes which can be filled from a lexicon governed by the particular constraints of the language in question. In practice, it has been noticed that the number of possible slots is effectively minimized because the sentences produced by native speakers of a language are not as widely various as might be expected by the Open Choice Principle.

The Idiom Principle, on the other hand, states that the choice in slots/the tree structure is not open. Rather, native speakers have a number of pre-constructed phrases (units) formed by single choices. This principle is sustainable because words do not occur at random in a text (Ji and Zhang, 2012:149-150; Liu, 2008:25).

Al-Anbar (2001:1) identifies two types of language structures. The first does not possess any special structural characteristics which serve as identifying features.

Normal sentences or phrases whose meaning is understood directly from their components belong to this category which is the most common e.g. (علي يلعب كرة القدم) (Ali plays football).

The second type can be identified by their structural and semantic characteristics, and this category includes proverbs, e.g.

رجع بخفي حنين

(literally He came back with Hunayn’s shoes).

Nicolas (1995:234-235) distinguishes between three semantic patterns constituted from word combinations, namely:

- 1- free combinations (also known as compositional sentences)
- 2- collocations
- 3- idioms.

Compositional sentences convey a literal meaning, which is simply the sum of all their constituent elements, i.e. all the words in the sentence or phrase contribute to the meaning of the structure.

According to Nicolas (1995), the second pattern, known as collocations, consists of two words, and underlies the free combinations, e.g. ‘fast food’. Collocations have a special feature, namely that their meaning is fixed whenever it is linked with a particular structure. Consequently, they can be viewed as ‘semi-compositional’.

The third type of semantic patterns, idioms, bear no compositional relation to their free composition sense, as can be demonstrated in an English example such as “to kick the bucket” meaning “to die”.

#### **4- Arabic and English idiomatic expressions**

New idioms may be coined daily and they may have their origins in various sources. Unsurprisingly, many arabic idiomatic expressions have their origins in the Holy Qur’an, for instance, the phrase “lay down the hearing”,

يلقون السمع

which means to listen to something.

A second key source of idioms is Al-Ḥadīth Al-sharīf, as narrated by the Prophet Mohammad. Examples which have their origins in the Hadith (mosquito’s wing) used to refer to any trivial matter

جناح بعوضة

Some idiomatic expressions are derived from poetry or classical Arabic sources (Domyati, 2009; Abdou, 2011: 18). Domyati (2009) notes, for

بنات العين

Or daughters of the eye i.e. tears, which was used for the first time by a poet, and then after a considerable period of use became an idiom. Other

idioms can be traced back to an utterance originally pronounced by a specific individual on a particular occasion as is the case with

سبق السيف العذل

Meaning (too late to back off from something).

This phrase was first used by Al Harith ibn Dalim when he was told to pardon a man he had already executed (Domyati, 2009). This example also illustrates the potential overlap with the domain of proverbs, an issue that will be discussed shortly. Idiomatic expressions can also be borrowed from other languages with numerous idioms having been transferred between languages via translation or cross-cultural/intercultural transfer. For example

وضع النقاط على الحروف

Literally translated (to put dots on the letters).

It indicates the conception of clarifying or emphasizing certain attitudes or perspectives.

اذاب الثلج

break the ice, which refers to start a conversation or a dialogue between two persons.

## 5- Linguistic Functions of idiomatic expressions

Fernando (1996, citing Halliday, 1985) classifies idioms into three groups according to their functions:

1. ideational
2. interpersonal
3. relational

Ideational idioms, also known as ‘the state and way of the world’ idioms, communicate the content of the message, and provide a description of the nature of the message that they convey. This type of idiom is frequently used in informal speech or journalism, but rarely used in formal speech.

Fernando (1996, citing Halliday, 1985) divides ideational idioms into those which describe: actions (to spill the beans); events

(a turning point); situations (to be in a pickle); people and things (a red herring); attributes (cut-and-dried); evaluations (A watched pot never boils); and emotions (green with envy).

Interpersonal idioms can fulfill an interactive function by means of expressing greetings and farewells (good morning); directives (let's face it); eliciting opinions (what do you think?); agreements (say no more); and rejections (come off it!). Moreover, they may also have the function of characterizing the message. Interpersonal idioms can be used covertly, e.g., believe (you) me or overtly, e.g., it's raining cats and dogs.

Third, relational idiomatic expressions essentially perform a connective function, i.e., they bring both cohesion and coherence to the text. Examples of relational idioms include in sum, on the other hand, for example, in addition, and at the same time.

## **6- Stylistic functions of idiomatic expressions**

According to Domyati (2009), idiomatic expressions are used in preference to more literal language to perform a number of functions.

First: idioms are often used to replace a literal word or expression for stylistic or rhetorical purposes, being used because they make the text richer, adding depth to the intended meaning and creating more of an impact in the mind of the intended audience.

Second: people are sometimes afraid to use certain terms which are seen as being cultural taboos, especially those related to death and killing, and thus replace them with idiomatic expressions that convey the same idea. for example, the word

الموت (death)

is usually avoided, replacing it instead by an idiom that conveys the same message:

قضى نحبه

Third: idiomatic expressions are used to show respect for and awareness of other people's feelings. Thus, a liar may be referred to as

dipped in shame

منغمس في العار

## **7- Idiomatic expressions and collocations**

As indicated in the previous discussion, languages have an abundance of idiomatic expressions, the meaning of which cannot be determined simply by analyzing their components individually because they are based on either metaphor or metonymy (Kövecses and Szabó, 1996: 326).

It seems difficult to distinguish idiomatic expressions from other linguistic phenomena such as proverbs, contextual expressions and commonly used linguistic structures which are mainly built on part-whole relationship. Thus, researchers such as Al-Anbar (2001) found close similarities between some proverbs and idiomatic expressions whilst Kövecses and Szabó (1996:327) claim that idiomatic expressions include the use of:

- 1-Metaphors: (spill the beans).
- 2-Metonymy: (throw up one's hands).
- 3-Pairs of words: (cats and dogs).
- 4-Sayings:(A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush).
- 5- Phrasal verbs: (come up).

It will be suggested later that those idiomatic expressions based on the use of metaphor or metonymy are different from those based on the use of collocations, proverbs, and the kind of common metonymy and metaphor which is used in everyday speech.

Jaeger (1999: 125-126) differentiates between idioms and figures of speech on a number of bases.

First, the meaning of an idiom is immediately clear, whereas the meaning of a figure of speech can be hidden or obscure.

Second, the meaning of an idiom is known to speakers beforehand but the meaning of a figure of speech needs an introduction and, thus, cannot serve as a means of instant communication.

Third, as a means of communication idioms are available to all participants – speakers and hearers alike - and, consequently, they are accepted for use in everyday speech. However, figures of speech tend to be exclusive to the speaker.

Fourth, synonyms are widespread among idioms, but there are no proper synonyms among figures of speech, although other figures may be used to express related ideas. It is also worth noting that many idiomatic expressions are included in those books designed primarily to discuss proverbs. For instance, Al-Anbar (2001) discusses some commonly used expressions as though they were idiomatic expressions. Although these expressions are mainly based on synecdoche or metonymy, they should

not be described as idiomatic expressions. Thus, the idiomatic expression (فوق الاسلام في قلبي كل موقع)

is literally translated, (so my heart appealed to Islam) is a commonly used expression that can be translated using the same lexical equivalents, it can be said that it has a metaphorical sense. Similarly, the expression

(فلم يرجع الينا بشي)

so (he came back to us with nothing) is a commonly used expression which only needs to be contextualized in order to clarify its meaning.

Oumar (2007) claims that idiomatic expressions are a type of collocation expression, because they are composed of juxtaposed and recurrent lexical items. He also believes that idiomatic expressions include proverbs; Prophetic wise-sayings, everyday expressions used on particular occasions,

e.g. ( Thank God ) اللهم الحمد,

( (أدام الله عزك ) May God keep you in luxury); greetings and compliments, e.g. (عليكم السلام (Peace be upon you), (بخير دتمم ) May God preserve you); commonly-used expressions which make reference to sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, and social tribes.

He also considers dictionary expressions to be collocational ones, e.g. ( ذهيو ) (شذرا مذرا) (spread far and wide). It should be noted that a number of scholars who have distinguished idiomatic expressions from other structures have expressed different views to Oumar's (2007) claim that idiomatic expressions should be viewed as a type of collocation. Husam Al-Din (1985:34) and Nicolas (1995:234-235) draw a distinction between idiomatic expressions and collocations or contextual expressions. Nunberg et al. (1994: 492) distinguish between idiomatic expressions and other structures such as fixed phrases, collocations, clichés, saying, proverbs and allusions. To discuss Oumar's claim, let us consider his definition of collocations (2007: 29): These are linguistic elements that communicate their meaning by using two or more successive as well as juxtaposed linguistic components.

## **8- Idiomatic expressions and proverbs**

A review of the literature reveals that scholars have always experienced considerable difficulty in differentiating between proverbs and idiomatic expressions due to the fact that they share a number of common features. In this section an effort is made to determine the difference between these



two linguistic phenomena by establishing their respective distinguishing features.

According to Jaeger (1999), proverbs are a form of “wisdom” literature. He also considers that proverbial expressions usually relate to customs, legal and ethical maxims, superstitions, weather, medical lore, and other categories of conventional wisdom. Jaeger believes that proverbs are moralizing in tone in that they lay down rules of behavior, set standards of good and evil, and are intended to teach moral lessons. In his view, this is the key element which distinguishes proverbs from idioms (Jaeger 1999: 37).

Yakub (1995: 21) defines proverb as: A concise expression loved by people both as a form and as a meaning; it is widely used, having been passed down through the generations without any change, and used frequently on similar occasions although its origin is unknown.

Al-Hamzawi (2000: 4) describes proverbs as “fixed, concise and common expressions, used metaphorically, which are true in meaning, and mainly based on the use of similes”. He identifies the following distinctive aspects of the proverb: • It is one type of fixed expression, being fixed in form. • It can be used in different contexts and in its relationship to these contexts, it adheres to specific semantic rules. • It is both rhetorical and expressive

## **9- Idiomatic expressions and metonymy**

Since a metaphorical nature of idiomatic expressions was mentioned previously. It is important to note here that an idiomatic expression is often based on the use of metonymy (figurative meaning) and that these two linguistic phenomena share two key features.

Firstly, they both communicate a meaning which is different to that of the meaning of their component elements.

Secondly, they both adhere to the rule of substitution, i.e. neither a metonym nor an idiomatic expression can be substituted by the use of a single word (Al-Anbar, 2001: 16). However, as Al-Qassimi (1979: 18) notes that there are also differences between idiomatic expressions and metonymy. Firstly, a metonym may refer to both a close and a remote meaning, e.g. the phrase(zayd has a lot ashes)

زيد كثير الرماد may be understood literally or figuratively

i.e. the person in question produces a lot of ash because he is a generous man who prepares large quantities of cooked food for his guests.

However, in the case of an idiomatic expression, it is not possible to refer to the literal meaning, even if that possibility

is available, (أصابها في مقتل) is to find someone's weak point second difference is that metonymy is closely related to the creativity of the writer, and it is not conventional by nature, thus a writer can create a new metonym but cannot invent a new idiomatic expression. Even if the origin of an idiomatic expression was a metonym, it takes a long time for an idiomatic expression to become widely used and easily recognized. Therefore, the number of metonyms in language is infinite, whereas the quantity of idiomatic expressions can be counted.

### **10- Idiomatic expressions and metaphor**

According to Al-Jurjani (1994), metaphor is one of the types of allegory

[ alMajaz] المجاز

which refers to any word that is used implicitly.

Or secrets of rhetoric , in Al-Jurjani's (n.d.: 304) work اسرار البلاغة

He defines allegory as “any word used differently from the way it is normally used”.

Abdul-Raof (2006: 209-211), defines allegory as a word being transferred from its denotative meaning to an allegorical meaning, having some evidence that prevents interpreting the real meaning of the word.

Allegory is divided into two types.

The first is mental or cognitive allegory, which is used as an attribution, i.e. attributing the verb or what is in its position to some other lexical item which is not normally used in that position e.g. المطر أنبتت الزرع literally, the rain planted the grass) because it is God who gives us the grass, not the rain (Ateeq, 1980: 337; Al-Jurjani, n.d: 304, Abdul-Raof, 2006: 212-213).

The second type of allegory is linguistic allegory, in which words are used with different, though related, meanings from those for which they would normally be used, e.g. employing lion to mean man, or hand to mean favor.

Allegory can, in turn, be subdivided into:

1. Metaphor: a linguistic allegory in which the relationship between the real meaning and the metaphorical one is a relation of similarity.

2. Synecdoche: the type of metaphor in which the relationship between the real meaning and the metaphorical one is a relation of difference (cf. Ateeq, n.d. and Abdul-Raof, 2006: 219).

Thus, it can be claimed that metaphor is a linguistic synecdoche (allegory) which is based on similarity between two things in the presence of evidence which prevents interpreting the real meaning, whether this evidence is verbal or contextual.

One of the types of idiomatic expression is semantically based on using metaphor which, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 104), is not only an aspect of language but a part of cognition and human knowledge as well.

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