

UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH IDIOMS: A STUDY OF LEXEMIC
STRUCTURES, LITERARY ORIGINS, AND COMPREHENSION
BARRIERS AMONG EFL (ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE)
LEARNERS

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Abstract. An idiom is one of the parts of language used in speech, written texts and mass media. The purpose of this study is to identify idioms, their types, dominant type and problems in understanding them. The data was obtained by reading, identifying the theories proposed by Makkai on this topic. There are four problems in understanding the meaning of an idiom: distinguishing between phrasal verbs that are idioms; translating an idiom; understanding the closest meaning of an idiom; and the lack of a grammatical rule for forming an idiom. Therefore, readers should understand the idiomatic expressions used in the novel to understand the meaning of idioms and the whole context of the novel.

Keywords. *Idioms of decoding and encoding, lexemic idioms, sememic idioms, problems.*

Понимание Английских Идиом: Исследование Лексических
Структур, Литературного Происхождения и Барьеров Понимания Среди
Изучающих Английский Как Иностранный

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Аннотация. Идиома – одна из частей языка, используемая в устной речи, письменных текстах и средствах массовой информации. Цель данного исследования – выявить идиомы, их типы, доминирующий тип и проблемы в их понимании. Данные были получены путём чтения, выявления теорий, предложенных Маккаем по данной теме. При понимании значения идиомы существует четыре проблемы: различие между фразовыми глаголами, являющимися идиомами; перевод идиомы; понимание наиболее близкого значения идиомы; и отсутствие грамматического правила образования идиомы. Поэтому читателям следует понимать идиоматические выражения, используемые в романе, чтобы понимать значение идиом и весь контекст романа.

Ключевые слова: *Идиомы декодирования и кодирования, лексемические идиомы, семемические идиомы, проблемы.*

Ingliz tilidagi iboralarni tushunish: leksemik tuzilmalar, adabiy kelib chiqish va ingliz tilini o'rganuvchilar orasida tushunish to'siqlarini o'rganish

Annotatsiya. Idioma og'zaki tilda, yozma matnda va ommaviy axborot vositalarida qo'llaniladigan qisman tillardan biridir. Ushbu tadqiqotning maqsadi - idiomalar, ularning turlari, dominant turi va idiomalarni tushunishdagi muammolarni aniqlash. Ma'lumotlar o'qish, Makkai tomonidan mavzu bilan bog'liq bo'lgan nazariyalarni aniqlash orqali olingan. Idioma ma'nosini tushunishda to'rtta muammo bor edi, ya'ni idioma yoki idioma bo'lmagan frazemalarni farqlash; idioma tarjimasini; idiomaning eng yaqin ma'nosini tushunish; va idiomani shakllantirishning grammatik qoidasi yo'q. Shuning uchun o'quvchilar idiomalarning ma'nosini va romanning butun kontekstini tushunish uchun romanda ishlatiladigan idiomatik iboralarni tushunishlari kerak.

Kalit so'zlar: Dekoderlash va kodlash iboralari, leksemik idiomalar, sememik idiomalar, muammolar.

Introduction

English has many ways to express an idea. One of them is by using idiomatic expressions. The use of idioms can be intended to make a mock and give advice to someone. Consequently, there are many idiomatic expressions found in spoken language (daily conversation) and written texts (novels, short stories, letters, poetry etc.). They make the language richer and more colorful. The use of idiom is unique. Idiom is one of the characteristics of English, but not all non-native speakers are aware of it. Idiom is combination of one word and other word which conveys a certain meaning. The problem is that, do all people understand the meaning of idiom?

The answer is that not all people understand the meaning of idioms. There are three reasons why understanding idioms are difficult. First, idiomatic expression cannot be translated word by word from its literal context. For example, in *'take someone for a ride'*, we cannot translate it into *'remove some one for her journey on a horse or bicycle or in a vehicle'*, but the meaning is *'deceive or cheat someone in some way'*. Secondly, it usually has double or more than two meanings, for example *'take off'*, in the sentence *'He took off his jacket and sat down'*. It means *'to remove something (especially clothing)'*, and in *'The plane took off on time'*. The meaning is *'to leave the ground and begin to fly (for aircraft)'*, and also *'Her singing career really took off after the talent show'*. It is *'to become suddenly successful or popular.'* Third, there is no grammatical rule in forming idioms. It means if the structure is changed, it will have different meanings or it will be meaningless. For example, take a word *'get'*; if we add another word like *'in, out, over'*, it will have different senses. The combination *'get in'* means *'to arrive or enter'*. *'get out'* means *'to leave or exit'*. And *'get over'* is *'to recover from something'*. If we add *'off up'*, it does not make senses.

McCarthy and O'Dell in their book 'English Idioms in Use' (McCarthy, M. & O'Dell, F. 2003) stated that 'Idioms are expressions which have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words'. It means that the meaning of idioms is not literal meanings, but they have non literal meanings. The best way to understand idioms are by looking at the contents. For example, 'drive somebody' is an idiom meaning 'make somebody angry or frustrated'.

In addition, Walker in the New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language explained that, 'An idiom is an expression peculiar to a language, not readily analyzable from its grammatical construction or from the meaning of component parts, as to put up with' (Walker, Read, A. Et. al. 2003). The point of that statement is that there is no grammatical rule in idiom. It is such a kind of habit of native speakers. Therefore, it is understandable that foreign learners have problems to understand the meaning of idiom.

Research Methods

Makkai in the book 'Idiom in Structure in English' divides idioms into two categories (Makkai, A. 1972):

1. Idioms of Encoding (identifiable)

Idioms of encoding are those idiosyncratic lexical combinations that have transparent meaning involving collocational preferences and restrictions, exemplified by at in 'he drove at 70 m. p. h'.

2. Idioms of Decoding (non-identifiable)

Idioms of decoding refer to those nonidentifiable and misleading lexical expressions whose interpretations could not be comprehended on the basis of only learned linguistic conventions. In other words, the meaning of decoding idioms is not predicable. Expressions such as 'beat about the bush' and 'fly off the handle' are examples of this type of idioms.

Makkai also classifies idiom of decoding into two types. Those are lexemic and sememic idioms (Makkai, A. 1972). The explanation is:

1) Lexemic Idioms

The lexemic idioms are idioms which collate with the familiar part of speech (verbs, nouns, adjective and preposition) and they are composed of more than one minimal free form and each lexon of which can occur in other environments as the realization of a monolexonic lexeme. The lexemic idioms are divided into six types. There are:

a. Phrasal Verb Idioms

A phrasal verb is a verb that contains of two kind of words. The first word is a verb, and the second word is a particle. The particle can be an article (a, an, the), preposition/adverb (up, in, out), and or affix (un-, in-, -ness, -ly); for example *'take off'* means *leave the ground*.

b. Tournure Idioms Tournures idioms are the largest lexemic idioms, usually containing at least three words and are mostly verbs. A tournures idiom mostly falls into sentences. Based on its structure, tournures idioms are divided into:

1) The form contains the compulsory definite article, for example *'to do a guy'* means *to disappear secretly*.

2) The form contains the compulsory indefinite article.

3) The form contains an irreversible binomial introduced by preposition, for example *'to be at seven and eight'* means *to be in condition of confusion, at odds*.

4) A direct object and further possible modifiers follow the primary verb, for example *'to build castles in the air'* means *to make impossible plans*.

5) The leading verb is not followed by the direct object but by the preposition plus a noun or nothing, for example *'to dance on the air'* means *to get hanged*.

6) The leading verb is BE, for example *'to be above board'* means *to be out in the open, honest*.

7) The form contains the compulsory it.

c. Irreversible Binomial idioms

Irreversible binomial idioms consist of two words, which are separated by the conjunction. The word orders in this structure are fixed, for example *'high and dry'* (without resources), and *'Romeo and Juliet'* (institutionalized symbols of ideal love or symbol of true love).

d. Phrasal Compound Idioms

Phrasal compound idiom contains primarily nominal made up of adjective plus noun, noun plus noun, or adverb plus preposition. For example, *'black mail'* means *any payment forced by intimidation* and *'bookworm'* means *a person committed to reading or studying*.

e. Incorporating Verb Idioms

Incorporating verb idioms have four forms. Those are noun-verb, adjective-noun, noun-noun, and adjective-noun. Incorporating verb idioms are separated by (-).

1) Noun-verb, *'sight-see'* means *'visit the famous places in a city, country, etc.'*.

2) Adjective-noun, *'blackmail'* means *'the crime of demanding money from a person by treating to tell somebody else a secret about them'*.

3) Noun-noun, *'bootleg'* means *'made and sold illegally'*.

4) Adjective –verb, *'whitewash'* means *'an attempt to hide unpleasant facts about somebody/something'*.

f. Pseudo-Idioms

Pseudo-idioms can mislead or misinform an unwary listener. For example, *cranberry*, *cranberry* according to oxford dictionary is *bright red acid berry*

produced by any plant of genus *oxycoccus*. In the phrase ‘*make a cranberry face*’ means ‘*the face become red*’.

2) Sememic idioms

Makkai said, ‘Sememic idioms usually convey pragmatic meanings related to a particular culture’ (Makkai, A. 1972). They include:

- a. Proverbs: e.g., ‘*a bird in hand is worth two in the bush*’.
- b. Familiar quotations: e.g., ‘*not a mouse stirring*’.
- c. First base idioms: associated with a national game like baseball, e.g., ‘*have two strikes against one*’, ‘*never to get to first base*’.
- d. Idioms of institutionalized politeness: such as ‘*may I?*’
- e. Idioms of institutionalized greeting: e.g., ‘*How do you do?, So long*’.
- f. Idioms of institutionalized understatement: e.g., ‘*I wasn't too crazy about him*’.
- g. Idioms of institutionalized hyperbole: e.g., ‘*He won't even lift a finger*’.

Sememic idioms include proverb and similar structure of sentence length, and therefore of less interest in our context. The lexemic idioms are composed of more than one minimal free form. They must also be able to give the wrong impression about an innocent listener. In this research, the researcher is going to use the lexemic idioms instead of sememic idioms.

Result

Some of the most iconic pieces of literature have survived hundreds of years and are read generation after generation, as well as being analysed as part of our education system. Most people will know the tale of ill-fated lovers Romeo and Juliet from the Shakespeare play of the same name, for example, and also the tragic friendship of George and Lenny in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*.

While these works of art are remembered for their unique characters, bold themes and emotional situations, they also gave us something else that has stood the test of time - well-loved idioms. An idiom is an expression which has a meaning which is not immediately apparent from the literal meaning of the individual words, but it is universally understood because it is commonly used.

You may see a number of idioms came from these two famous pieces of work.

Break the ice

Origin: This comes from Shakespeare's *Taming the Shrew*. In the play, Tranio encourages Petruchio to "break the ice" with Katherine to get to know her, suggesting that he may like her better if he knows more about her.

Meaning: To do or say something to relieve the tension or awkwardness in a social situation.

Wear my heart upon my sleeve

Origin: This saying comes from the Shakespeare play *Othello* when Iago describes how he would be vulnerable if he revealed his dislike of Othello.

Meaning: To reveal true emotions and be very honest about thoughts and feelings.

There's method in my madness

Origin: In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius observes Hamlet's antics and says: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it." He is saying that he suspects Hamlet may appear to be behaving irrationally on the surface, but he has a good reason for this.

Meaning: There's a good reason for a person's actions even though it's not obvious what they are at first and they may appear to be behaving in a strange way.

Wild goose chase

Origin: In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio and Romeo are speaking about going on a wild goose chase.

Meaning: A fruitless activity, which will ultimately serve no purpose and usually also takes a significant amount of time to carry out.

The world is my oyster

Origin: This comes from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives Of Windsor*. When Falstaff refuses to lend Pistol money, Pistol responds by drawing his sword and saying: "Why, then the world's mine oyster, which I with sword will open."

Meaning: You can do anything you like or go anywhere you want.

Green eyed monster

Origin: Another phrase from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Iago says "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on."

Meaning: Someone who has been bitten by the green eyed monster is said to be jealous of someone else.



Heart of gold

Origin: This phrase comes from the Shakespeare play Henry V. Discussing the character of the King, Pistol says “The king’s a bawcock, and a heart of gold, a lad of life, an imp of fame, of parents good, of fist most valiant.”

Meaning: A person who has a heart of gold is said to be extremely kind and generous.

Set my teeth on edge

Origin: In Henry IV, Part 1, also by Shakespeare, Hotspur complains about how much he hates poetry, saying, "And that would set my teeth nothing an edge, nothing so much as mincing poetry."

Meaning: If something has set your teeth on edge it means you find something extremely annoying.

Love is blind

Origin: This idiom is written in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. He wrote: “For love is blind all day, and may not see.”

Meaning: The phrase has a couple of different, but linked, meanings. The first is that if people are in love with someone they cannot see their faults. The second is that true love is not based on looks and can be unexpected.

Live off the fat of the land

Origin: The phrase is famously used in John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*. George tells Lenny they'll live off the fat of the land and have rabbits when they make enough money which means they no longer have to work.

Meaning: To live the best possible life without having to work hard

Discussion

English is one of the most idiomatic languages in the world, containing more than thousands of idiomatic expressions that are used in daily speech, media and literature. This makes the language rich that is why foreign learners should be aware of their types and use. Idiom cause problems to foreign learners since most of them do not have simple equivalent in another language. Especially, in understanding idiom in English novel, four problems in understanding idiom that was explained in the sub-chapter before, always exist (Khofiana Mabruroh. 2015). Here, I will discuss the reasons why those problems exist in understanding idiom. There are three ways to find the answer from that question, such as from aspects of etymology, collocation and translation. The explanation is elaborated as follows:

1.Aspect of Etymology

Idioms tend to be frozen in their forms and meanings and do not allow changes in the structure and meaning. However, a variation is one important aspect of idiom. The word of some idioms can be replaced with other words. Some words of an idiom can function as a normal sequence of grammatical construction that can be replaced with other words but the meaning is changed.

In general, variants of idiom are formed by replacing some of the original words. Several variations of the idiom have been widely recognized and become conventionalized. They are known as variations of an acceptable idiom. For example, in the phrase *'What happened?'* there are many variants of this constructions, such as *'What's up?'*; *'What's the matter?'*; and *'What's going on?'*. All of those variants are acceptable and valid for use. However, not all variants of English idioms are accepted as valid idioms, for example in the phrase *'What's the matter?'* The phrase *'What's the matter?'* is only used in colloquial usage.

2.Aspect of Collocation

Some idioms are formed by collocation. Collocation can be formed by adding two or more words to a word. There are two types of collocation, structural and lexical collocations. There are some problems in understanding collocation. First, in structural collocation, many of the English verb +preposition combinations (also called phrasal verbs) have more than one meaning. For example, in an English Idiom Dictionary, the word 'give up' means 'to abandon someone or something as being lost' and 'to give up trying to do something with someone or something'. Second, there is more than one phrasal verb variation that is formed by a verb with different prepositions. In structural collocation, the preposition of the phrasal verb collocation in this particular can be replaced with another preposition. The meaning of that construction does not change. For example, the expression 'afraid of', the word 'of' may be replaced with word 'with' to become 'afraid with'. They have the same meaning, which is 'feeling frightened' (English Idiom Dictionary) and accept in target language, but the phrase 'afraid with' is not grammatical in English. However, lexical collocation is different. If the preposition of the phrasal verb is replaced with another preposition, the meaning will be different. For example, I take the word 'go on; means 'continue'. If the preposition 'on' is replaced with 'up', the word will become 'go up;' that means 'rise'. If the preposition is replaced with 'in', the word becomes 'go

in'; that means 'enter', etc. If the preposition is replaced by another preposition, the meaning will be different too.

3.Aspect of Translation

Idiom exists in all languages in the world. Every language has different ways to express meaning through lexical items. Many foreign learners do not understand idioms because they are influenced by culture. In the translation of idioms, they cannot be translated literally word by word. It would be meaningless or it even conveys incorrect meanings, unless the idioms have the same form of them in the target language text. Therefore, translators have to find the closest natural equivalence in target language (Khofiana Maburoh. 2015).

From the explanation above, the conclusion is that the aspects of etymology, collocation and translation are related. The aspect of etymology influences the aspect collocation in forming different collocations. The aspects of etymology and collocation influence the aspect of translation for a translator to choose the closest meaning of an idiom.

Conclusion

By referring to the result of the research, I present the following conclusions. In understanding the meaning of idiom, there are four problems existed. The first problem is the foreign learners are confused by the distinction between phrasal verbs that is idiom or not idiom. The second problem is translation of idiom. The third problem is the problem in understanding the closest meaning of idiom. The last problem is there is no grammatical rule of forming idiom.

Based on the conclusions above, I would like to give suggestions to the readers, especially those who are interested in reading English novel. The readers should comprehend the idiomatic expressions used in novel, so that they understand the meaning of idioms. After that, they can understand the whole context of novel well.

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