

## **Cultural Difficulties of English Idioms Confronting Foreign Learners**

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### **Abstract**

English idioms are expressions that construed as a part of metaphorical language; they have figurative meanings as well as literal ones. They belong to the culture of language and then to its systematic features. This paper attempts to highlight the cultural nature of idioms, their types and grammatical features, their similarities and differences with other multi-word expressions like free combinations, collocations, proverbs, clichés, metaphors, fixed expressions and then their features in language structure.

**Keywords:** cultural difficulties, idioms

### **1. Idioms and Culture**

One of the main reasons that makes idioms difficult to be recognized and interpreted is their cultural specificity. An idiom, according to the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (in Bouarroudj 2010) is a form of expressions peculiar to a given language. The concept of peculiarity implies that idioms are related to only one language or one culture. When a language with its aspects is a system of social establishment, this means that idioms represent features of the nature of its culture and predetermine customs, beliefs and social attitudes. Therefore, their origin come from various areas; for instance, the idiomatic expression *blue blood* "was used by the Moors to signify the veins of Spaniards which appeared really blue in colour against their white skin, but later on the same locution came to mean 'of aristocratic birth'." (Kavka 2003:31). Languages are different in their choice of individual items of idioms. For example, in English it is *raining cats and dogs*, in Welsh *it is raining old women and sticks*.

Arabic and English differ in terms of origin, features of culture, customs, and beliefs. This difference can be shown through the nature of idioms. The English idiomatic expression *the fox is not taken twice from the same snare* has equivalence in Arabic لا يلدغ المؤمن من جحر مرتين. But, both languages differ in their selection of the items which construct the idiom; English prefers to use a name of an animal *fox*, while Arabic uses the religious term believer (Awwad 2006). Idioms that are part of English culture such as *to go to the bar to bury one's sorrows* has no counterpart in Arabic. The reason

is that Islamic culture which is the religion of most Arabs prohibits places like bars and pops and drinks like alcohol or wine. English culture is interested in the word *dog*, this is clearly seen in idioms such as *dog's chance*, *dog's breakfast*, *dog's life*, *rain cats and dogs*, *let the sleeping dogs lie* etc. thus, such idiomatic expressions have no counterparts in Arabic because, unlike English culture, *dogs* are not of such importance in Arabic culture. Likewise, Arabic has a preference to *iron* in the English idiom *diamond cuts diamond*. Both languages have the same idiomatic expression not to *play with fire* لا تلعب بالنار in giving advice or warn someone from doing what seems dangerous.

The lexical items of each language are influenced by its culture and the way in which people organize their ideas about their environment. Having knowledge of the culture as well as the context of use is the cue for better understanding and interpreting idioms. In this respect, Ponterotto (1994:3) states that "it is necessary to understand metaphoricality and its culture-specific connotation in order to correctly interpret even simple texts".

## 2. Types of Idioms

Makkai (1972:172-179) divided all idioms into two groups: idioms of encoding (phrasal idioms) and those of decoding (semantic idioms).

### 2.1. Idioms of Encoding

Idioms of encoding are those which compel the speaker to encode in a certain way. This type of idioms could be best recognized through making a comparison between different languages by the use of proper preposition. Makkai gives an example to *drive at sixty miles per hour*. He asserts that the learners of English from France would probably use *with* instead of *at* because according to the grammar of their language it is used in this way.

### 2.2. Idioms of Decoding

Idioms of decoding are those which force the hearer to decode in a certain way. These types are misleading lexical expressions whose interpretation could not be inferred by using only independently learned linguistic conventions. Those expressions are like '*red herring*' and '*beat around the bush*'. This type of idioms could be divided into lexemic and sememic idioms.

#### 2.2.1. Lexemic Idioms

Lexemic idioms are lexical items that convey metaphorical meanings such as:

- 1) Phrasal verbs: *make up*, *turn out*, *bring up*, etc.
- 2) tournures ('turn of phrase'): *fly off the handle*, *rain cats and dogs*, *kick the bucket*, *have it out with somebody*, *be well-off*, etc.
- 3) irreversible binomials: *pepper and salt (sic)*, *coffee and cream*, etc.
- 4) phrasal compounds: *hot dog*, *blackmail*, *high-handed*, etc.
- 5) incorporating verbs: *eavesdrop*, *manhandle*, *boot-lick*, etc.

6) pseudo-idioms: *kith and kin, spit and span, to and fro*, etc.

### 2.2.2. Sememic Idioms

Sememic idioms are used to convey pragmatic meanings related to a particular culture. They include several subclasses, nearly all pertaining to institutionalized language use. These subclasses as:

- 1) idioms of 'institutionalised politeness' such as *may I...X?* With interrogative intonation for 'I want to...X' or *may I ask who's calling?*, for the imperative 'identify yourself'
- 2) idioms of 'institutionalised greeting' — *how do you do?, so long*
- 3) idioms of 'institutionalised understatement' - *I wasn't too crazy about him*
- 4) idioms of 'institutionalised hyperbole' - *he won't even lift a finger* (Makkai 1972: 172-179).

### 3. Idioms Based on Grammatical Features

McCarthy and O'Dell (2002:6) present different forms of English idioms according to their grammatical features:

Form	Example	Meaning
Verb + object/complement (and/or adverbial)	Kill two birds with one stone	Produce two useful results by just doing one action
Prepositional phrase	In the blink of an eye	In an extremely short time
Compound	A bone of contention	Something which people argue and disagree over
Simile (as + adjective + as, or like + noun)	As dry as a bone	Very dry indeed
Binomial (word + and + word)	Rough and ready	Crude and lacking sophistication
Trinomial (word + word + and + word)	Cool, calm and collected	Relaxed, in control, not nervous
Whole clause or sentence	To cut a long story short	To tell the main points, but not all the fine details

Table 1. Types of idioms according to McCarthy and O'Dell (2002)

### 4. Features of Idioms

As we have seen previously, that idioms are successions of words whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of their individual components. Ball (1974 cited in Bouarroudj 2010) points out certain features which are essential and necessary in the recognition of idioms. These features are:

#### 4.1. Grammatical Usage

Idioms break the rules of grammatical usage; for example:

*It is time we went home* (the use of the past to mean a future action).

*When you come tomorrow, I will pay you back.* (Using the present tense to express an action of future).

#### **4.2. Deviation from Grammatical Rules**

Idioms are not always grammatical, but they are used by native speakers of the language with a fixed structure and meaning. For example:

*It's ages since we met.* (Using a singular verb with a plural noun).

*He's a friend of mine.* (Using possessive rather than personal pronoun).

#### **4.3. Allusive Expressions**

Idioms appear to have a direct interpretation, but factually they have a different meaning. This meaning is difficult to work out when it is idiomatically considered. For example:

*Let's call it a day* means *let's stop work now.*

*What are they up to?* Is a question means what about some mischievous deeds?

#### **4.4. Conventional Phrases**

These expressions are special which are familiar and known by native speakers of a language.

For example:

*How are you doing?* (An expression used to ask someone about his health).

*How do you do?* (An expression used to greet someone for the first time).

#### **4.5. Word Order Alteration**

English idioms, usually, do not respect the English word order. For example:

*It may be well ahead of time.* (In advance): normal word order.

*It may well be ahead of time.* (Very probably): idiomatic expression.

#### **4.6. Phrasal Verbs**

Phrasal verbs are the most common type of idioms in English. They carry idiomatic meaning that cannot be inferred from the form unless the phrase is usually known. For example:

*I took you for my brother.* (To think, but wrongly).

*She took him in.* (To deceive).

#### **4.7. Metaphorical Use**

Metaphoricity is one of the most features that is frequently referred to. Idioms are used metaphorically; their surface structure sometimes has a little role or nothing in understanding the idiomatic meaning. For example, *hit the nail on the head* means to describe the exact nature of something such as a problem, a solution, or a situation, the meaning of the individual words of this idiom is different from the meaning of the whole expression.

## 5. Grammatical and Syntactic Restrictions of Idioms

In addition to the features above, Baker (1992: 63) identifies some grammatical and syntactic restrictions of idioms. According to her, a speaker or a writer cannot normally do any of the following with an idiom because the meaning would be changed. In other words, idioms accept no:

- Addition to their component parts because their meaning may alter or their idiomatic expression may remove. Thus, adding the adverb *very* to the adjective *long* in *the long and short of it* (\*the very long and short of it) affects its figurative meaning.
- Deletion from their component words as in deleting the adjective *sweet* from the expression *have a sweet tooth* would change its meaning. Hence, (\*have a tooth) has no idiomatic sense.
- Idioms accept no Substitution (replacement) in their individual words even if those words are synonyms. For example, the noun *bucket* in *kick the bucket* cannot be substituted by the noun *pail* in spite of their same meaning. Therefore, (\*kick the pail) removes the idiomatic sense.
- Idioms accept no modification in the grammatical structure of an idiom, because this leads to the destruction of its meaning. For example, the expression (\*stock and barrel lock) is not idiomatic because of the changed order of the parts in the expression *lock stock and barrel*.
- Comparative form *-er* to be added to the adjective *hot* in the expression *be in hot water* because it changes the conventional meaning of the idiom which has the meaning of *be in trouble*.

The passive form like *some ropes were known to paraphrase the meaning of they knew the ropes* which means they knew how to do a job.

Idioms often resist variation in forms. Some, however, tend to be more flexible than others. In this respect, McCarthy and O'Dell (2002) point out that sometimes the grammar or the vocabulary of some idioms can have a slight variation. Occasionally an idiom in the active voice can be used in the passive voice, for example: *government ministers always pass the buck* if they are challenged about poverty (blame someone else / refuse to accept responsibility).

*The buck has been passed* from minister to minister. (No one seems to prepare to accept the responsibility). Some verb-based idioms have noun- compound forms as well, for example:

There is too much *buck-passing* in the government nowadays (no one accepts the blame for anything). A constituent in an idiom can be varied; for example:

*Stop acting the fool / goat* (stop acting stupidly). These restrictions should be taken into account since they affect the degree of idiomaticity, which is our next standpoint.

## 6. The Use of Idioms

Some expressions of language are appropriate to be used in particular situations. This applies to the use of English idiomatic expressions. When a writer or a speaker uses idiomatic language, s/he concentrates on his/her culture with the group of his society, and the audience his speech is directed to them. Collins (2005 cited in Bouarroudj 2010) argues that the social relationship between the speaker/writer, the addressee is a significant factor. For example, standard idioms are appropriate to be used in formal situations, while informal ones are used in several situations. It is not difficult for native speakers to know the different uses of idioms, but in the case of non-native speakers, it is better to learn idioms of the language in the same way as learning its vocabulary and try to practise their appropriateness in context.

In addition to the classification of idioms according to their idiomatic features, Fernando (1996) has also proposed a classification of idioms according to their functions: ideational, interpersonal and relational idioms.

### **6.1. Ideational Idioms**

This term is used by Fernando to refer to expressions that "contribute to the subject matter of a discourse by functioning as impressionistic packages of information" (ibid: 188). These expressions may describe actions (*spill the beans*), situations (*under the weather*), people and things (*a red herring*), evaluations (*a watched pot never boils*), and emotions (*green with envy*).

### **6.2. Interpersonal Idioms**

Interpersonal idioms, on the other hand, include phrases that "facilitate interaction between language-users, especially in promoting conviviality" (ibid: 188). These expressions include: greetings and farewells (*good morning*).

### **6.3. Relational Idioms**

Relational idioms "relate phrases or portions of a discourse" (ibid: 188) which ensure that the discourse is cohesive and coherent. For example, *on the contrary*, *in addition* and *on the other hand*.

Since idioms, collocations, metaphors, proverbs and fixed expressions belong to multi-word expressions of language, it seems useful to distinguish between these expressions and idioms to identify an idiom from other multi-word expressions. In spite of some similarities, there are some differences which make idioms to be easily recognized.

## **7. Free Combinations, Collocations and Idioms**

One of the useful classifications of multi-word expressions is by Kavka (2003). He divides all expressions into three groups: free combinations, collocations and genuine idioms (idioms proper). Free combinations include all the words that have their own independent meanings. For example, the noun murder can combine freely with many verbs such as to *analyze*, *describe*, *condemn*, *examine...etc....a*



*murder*. In a similar way these verbs can combine freely with a number of other nouns such as *accident*, *event*, *adventure...etc*. The second group is collocations which include "expressions, composed of two items at least, in which the choice of one imposes restrictions on the choice of the other" (ibid: 13). Kavka explains this definition more by giving an example of the verb *to laugh* and says if we want to add an adverb to follow it, the number of such adverbs is limited. What is suitable would be possible, thus, *laugh heartily* is a correct collocation, but *laugh cordially* is not accrued. The third group is genuine idioms. Genuine idioms are "a group of multi-word expressions in which at least one of the words does not carry its literal meaning, so that the meaning of the whole phrase cannot be predicted from the meaning of its separate words, e.g., pull one's leg"(ibid: 13).

To sum up, the meaning of an idiom cannot be deduced from the meaning of its parts. They resist variations such as substitution, addition, passivization, deletion etc. Whereas, the meaning of collocations and free combinations is reflected from their parts. They also accept syntactic (grammatical and lexical) variations. The difference is mainly in the degree of substitutability. The parts of a free combination are freely substitutable, while the parts in the restricted are more limited in the choice of linguistic elements and the parts are used in a special context.

## 8. Idioms and Proverbs

Idioms are hard to distinguish from other non-literal expressions like metaphors and proverbs. Proverbs, for instance, behave just as idioms, allow little or no variation in form. Unlike idioms, however, proverbs display shared cultural wisdom. Proverbs are also different in the sense that they "consists of two halves balancing each other, with parallel syntax" (Kniffka 1997:75). In this case, the speaker may utter only the first part of the proverb to express the whole meaning. Thus, *do not count your chickens* is instead of *do not count your chickens before they hatched*. According to Kniffka (1997), this kind of two halves structure which is widely used are found in proverbs in different languages and cultures and they express popular wisdom. Although proverbs are considered as a specific culture many of them have equivalents in different languages. For example, the English expression *out of sight out of mind* has a similar proverb in Arabic *من غاب عن العين غاب عن القلب*. Kniffka (ibid: 78) claims that a native speaker of a language can know exactly what a proverb in that language means, and when it can be used. This can apply to idioms as well. It is difficult to say whether a non-native speaker can know precisely what a foreign language idiom means. Non-native speakers often try to infer the meaning by comparing the expression to a similar one in their own native language. Idioms and proverbs are not always transparent and their meanings sometimes ambiguous.

## 9. Idioms and Clichés

Idioms are defined as "complex bits of frozen syntax, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts" (Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992: 33). But idioms are not the only expressions that have a feature of prefabricated speech. There are many other types of formulaic fixed phrases like clichés. Clichés too consist of relatively frozen patterns, but their meaning can be derived from their

individual parts. Expressions like, *there is no doubt about it, a good time was had by all, and have a nice day* are clichés. They differ from idioms in the way that they are easily understandable from the meaning of their individual parts.

## 10. Idioms and Metaphors

Both idioms and metaphors cannot be understood if their meanings are taken literally (Maalej 2005). He identifies idioms and metaphors as culture-specific aspects of a particular language. That is to say, there are no direct one to one correspondent counterparts between a target language and a source language. Metaphors were recognized as rhetorical devices that compare between two objects or two things that are seemingly different. In this respect, King (2000:216) defines the metaphor as "describing something by using an analogy with something quite different". For example, the expression *the words are clear as crystal* is a metaphor that expresses the similarity of the degree of clarity between the words and the crystal.

## 11. Idioms and Fixed Expressions

Fixed expressions as well as idioms allow a little or no variation in form. But they differ from idioms since their meanings are almost transparent. Thus, the meaning of *as a matter of fact, not at all, ladies and gentle men, all the best* can easily be inferred from the meaning of its constituents. In contrast to idioms *beat around the bush* or *a horse of a different colour* where the meaning of the whole expression is not worked out from the meaning of its parts (Baker 1992:63).

## 12. Idioms and Language Structure

The focus in studies of idioms has ranged from form and frozenness to metaphoricity and the degree of literalness, i.e. from structure to idiom meaning (Mantyla 2004 in Kainulainen 2006:9). In other words idioms have been studied from different perspectives. Mantyla (2004) mentions five approaches taken by linguists on idioms:

1. The structure of an idiom and its variations and transformations
2. The processing and storing of idioms
3. The metaphoricity of idioms
4. Teaching, learning and understanding idioms
5. Idioms within the wider perspective of idiomatic language, and the functions of idioms (cited in Kainulainen 2006:9). Each one of the approaches represents a certain period of time and reflects different lines of thinking in linguistics at various times.

Uriel Weinreich is considered the pioneer in studying the structure of idioms. Like other definitions, he suggests one of the most common definitions of an idiom which says that an idiom is "a complex expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements" (Wienreich 1969:26). This definition highlights structure and not the meaning. Later on, he (ibid: 42) adds, and ends



up saying that an idiom is a "phrase logical unit that involves at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsense". This seems not clear enough and needs an explanation. Weinreich himself explains the definition by suggesting three ways of interpreting the expression *red herring*. The first way is to explain it literally as a fish coloured the colour of red. The second way is to select the subsense and understand the expression as a fish smoked and cured with saltpeter. The third way of interpreting the expression is by recognizing it as an idiom and paraphrasing it as 'phony issue'. The definition leaves out expressions like *catch the train/bus* in which one constituent carries a special meaning and can be combined with other words without changing its meaning, so a person catches a bus or a train, catches still refers to the same activity. In the same way the expression *foot the bill* is excluded, where only one constituent, foot carries a special meaning that is used only in this particular expression. Generally, what Weinreich did on idioms was "highly formal" (Fernando 1996:6) but his work focused on the structure rather than the meaning.

On another level of Weinreich, Fraser further investigated idioms within the framework of transformational grammar. Fraser (1970:22) defines an idiom as "a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed". He clarifies the definition by claiming that neither individual constituents have maintained their literal interpretations within the idioms, nor constitute the semantic interpretation of the constructed idiomatic expression.

Fraser superficially discussed two problems: first, how to present the meaning of idiom structure and, second, how idioms can undergo particular syntactic transformations. His hierarchy which looks at the transformational possibilities of idioms ranges from LO (completely frozen e.g., *by and large*, *on the fly*) through LI (adjunction e.g., turning over a new leaf), L2 (insertion e.g., a penny had *just* dropped), L3 (permutation e.g., *pass the buck*, *break the ice*), L4 (extraction e.g., *passive* transformation), L5 (reconstitution e.g., *buck-passing*, *ice-breaker*) to L6 (unrestricted i.e. no idioms belong to this particular level). He (ibid: 27) came to the conclusion that idioms are elusive and behave not as could be expected of their structure. English idioms are widely different in how frozen they are and in how much they accept various syntactic transformations.

Weinreich's (1969) and Fraser's (1970) works have a significant role in the area of idiom studies. There were also other well-known studies on idiom structure such as Makkai's (1972) work (see p.10) and Newmeyer (1974). Then, other studies on idioms published later on to represent a new approach to idioms and the concentration is not determined by the structure. From these studies Fernando & Flavel's (1981) work (see p.17) and Fernando's (1996) work.

Fernando (1996:35-36) states that invariance and restricted variation are the most prominent characteristics of an idiom. She divides idioms into three sub-classes: pure, semi and literal idioms. Pure idioms are non-literal multi-word expressions that are conventionalized. These expressions of idioms are

the one that is not invariant. For example, the expression *by and large* is a pure idiom, because its real meaning has nothing to do with its words. Semi-idioms, on the other hand, are expressions that have at least one literal element and one with a non-literal meaning. This type is also either invariant or allows restricted variance. For example, *foot the bill* (i.e. pay), in which *foot* is the non-literal element, whereas, the word *bill* is used literally. Literal idioms are semantically less complicated than the other two. These expressions such as *merry Christmas* and *happy New Year* encounter one important feature of idioms. They are invariant or have restricted variance. Fernando (1996: 37) admits the difficulty to draw a clear boundary between these idiom types.

For her, invariance and restricted variation are the most important features of an idiom. However, according to (Mantyla 2012) metaphoricity is the most significant feature since it includes variance and varied forms. In this dimension, an idiom is an expression that consists of a group of words, and its meaning is different from the meaning of its individual words. This definition excludes multi-word expressions that have a different meaning from the meanings in their individual words such as proverbs and conventional phrases. The focus of this definition is on the meaning of the whole expression rather than on the structure. Since the purpose of this study is to investigate how M.A. students in the Center for English and Translation Studies, Aden University recognize and interpret and how they think in trying to get the meanings of English idioms they may encounter in general.

### 13. Conclusion

Cultural specificity of idioms makes their difficulty to be recognized and interpreted by foreign learners. Idioms are not the main focus in teaching, but special exercises could indeed improve their recognition, interpretation and processing. Therefore, idioms should be introduced to students at least in language lessons. This can help students to be aware of such expressions and take specific care of them. Teachers and teaching materials should include practice on idioms since it improves students' recognition, interpretation and process and may help promote proficiency. All in all, idioms might play a minor role but they are very significant aspects and could not be neglected in language teaching.

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