Idioms - Grammaticality and Figurativeness

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Abstract

Language as a system of communication has literal and figurative meanings. While the literal meaning is the direct reference of words or sentences to objects, the figurative sense is used for giving an imaginative description or a special effect. Such a meaning characterizes notions like metaphors, similes, proverbs and idioms. Idioms, as means of non-literal language, have a great extent use in everyday language. They carry a metaphorical sense that makes their comprehension difficult, since their meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of their constituent parts. The frequent, spontaneous and appropriate use of idioms is usually a mark of good English, and an indicator of native or near native mastery of the language. Although the idiomatic expressions are not always grammatical, they are established, accepted and used by native speakers of the language with a fixed structure and meaning. Taking all these into account, the present paper aims at highlighting some aspects regarding grammatical features implied in the structure of idioms, as well as some connections between idioms and other forms of figurative language.

Key words: language, idiom, restrictions, non-literal.

Language is considered to be a system of communication, used by a particular community of speakers, which has literal and figurative meanings. While the literal meaning is the direct reference of words or sentences to objects, the figurative sense is used for giving an imaginative description or a special effect. Therefore, the meaning of individual words in an expression has nothing to do in the comprehension of the whole meaning. Such a meaning characterizes notions like metaphors, similes, proverbs and idioms. Among these, idioms have a great extent use in everyday language, and they are considered as one of the most frequently used means of non-literal language.

Since idioms, metaphors, proverbs, similes and fixed expressions belong to the non-literal or figurative language, then it seems difficult to identify an idiom from the other forms of figurative language, but although there are some similarities between idioms and other forms of non- literal language, some differences are obvious, and thus, one can recognize an idiom quite easily.

> ➢ **Idioms and Metaphors**

Metaphors constitute a large part of the everyday language. They have been recognized as rhetorical devices that compare two seemingly different objects. King (2000:216) defines metaphors as '*describing something by using an analogy with something quite different'.* For example, *'the words are clear as crystal'* is an idiom that expresses the similarity between the words and the crystal in the degree of clarity while examples such as*: New ideas blossomed in her mind / His temper boiled over. / Inner peace is a stairway to heaven / His advice is a valuable guiding light. / The wind in the trees is the voice of the spirits* are metaphors.

King (2000:216) considers that metaphors are beautiful due to their ability to explain a complex vague expression making it more understandable and clear. According to Maalej (2005), both idioms and metaphors have in common the fact that they cannot be understood if taken literally. He identifies idioms and metaphors as culture-specific aspects of a particular language, i.e., the non-existence of a direct one to one correspondence between a target language and a source language is the result of culture-specific metaphors and states:

> Culture-specific metaphors are best represented in phraseology. Native language idioms and set phrases can blend together ethno-specific concepts pertaining to the world view of it speakers, to their national character, as well as their traditional social relations, thus becoming an embodiment of national dispositions and spiritual values. They are presented metaphorically indirectly and figuratively, which is why culture-specific metaphors produce idioms that have no corresponding counterparts in another language. (Maalej 2005:215).

➢ **Idioms and Clichés**

A very interesting aspect is given by the prefabricated speech which is often used in performed language. Idioms, which may also be defined as *'complex bits of frozen syntax, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts'* (Nattinger and De Carrico, 1992:32), are considered as one feature of this type of speech. However, they are not the only kind of prefabricated speech; there are many other kinds of formulaic fixed phrases, among which the clichés. Clichés resemble idioms because they also include patterns which are relatively frozen, but they differ from these, in the sense that these patterns are usually made up of extended stretches of language. In clichés like *there is no doubt about it*, *a good time was had by all* and *have a nice day* the distinction from idioms is obvious, being easily understandable from the meaning of their individual constituents. In contrast, idioms are often learnt as a single unit without taking into account the meaning of their parts.

➢ **Idioms and Proverbs**

Just like idioms, proverbs *'are special, fixed, unchanged phrases which have special, fixed, unchanged meanings'* (Ghazala 1995:142). They differ from idioms in that they display shared cultural wisdom. Therefore, proverbs are easily understandable and, sometimes, the first part of the proverb might be enough to express the whole meaning. For instance, '*do not count your chickens*' is used instead of '*do not count your chickens before they have hatched*'. Even if proverbs may be considered as culture-specific because they are very bound to culture, many proverbs have equivalents in different languages. For instance, the English expression '*Out of sight, out of mind*' has a similar proverb in Romanian "Ochii care nu se vad, se uita". Other examples may include:

English Proverbs		Romanian Translation
Too many words are the poverty of mankind.	→	*Vorba multă, sărăcia omului.*
All is well that ends well.	→	*Totu-i bine cand se termină cu bine.*
A friend in need is a friend indeed.	→	*Prietenul, la nevoie se cunoaşte.*
There's no smoke without fire.	→	*Nu iese fum fără foc.*
Knowledge is power.		*Cine are carte, are parte.*

Idioms and proverbs are not always transparent, and their meanings are sometimes ambiguous. Yet learners are fascinated by them since they are always intrigued with expressive colorful language. Idioms and proverbs are also a part of figurative language that produces cultural information, and their use shows that the person is a part of that social group that uses them (Hartch and Brown 1995:202-203).

> ➤ **Idioms and Fixed Expressions**

There are fixed expressions like *having said that, as a matter of fact, not at all, ladies and gentlemen, all the best* which allow a little or no variation in form, just as idioms do. Fixed expressions, however, are distinguished from idioms since they have almost transparent meanings. Thus, the meaning of *as a matter of fact* for example, can easily be inferred from the meaning of its constituents, in contrast to idioms like *pull a fast one* or *fill the bill* where the meaning of the whole expression is different from the meaning of its parts. In spite of its clarity, the meaning of a fixed expression, as that of an idiom, is not just the sum meanings of its components. Fixed expressions may bring up in the mind of the reader all the aspects of experience associated with the different contexts in which the expression is used. This characteristic seems to be the cause of the widespread use of fixed and semi-fixed expressions in any language. (Baker 1992: 63)

Although they have many features in common with other forms of non-literal language, idioms have their own characteristics.

Generally speaking, an idiom is a kind of lexical unit in which the whole meaning of the expression is not apparent from the meanings of its components. According to Bell (1974:3), there are certain essential features which help in the recognition of idioms. Some of these features are:

> ➤ **Alteration of Grammatical Rules**

The idiomatic expression is not always grammatical, but it is established, accepted and used by native speakers of the language with a fixed structure and meaning.

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

> ➤ **Conventional Phrases**

Idioms are special expressions which are almost known and agreed by all the members of a particular community.

E.g. *How are you doing? (*Expression used to ask someone about his health).
*Once in a blue moon (*rarely, infrequently).

> ➤ **Alteration of Word Order**

English Idiomatic expressions, usually, do not respect the English word order.

E.g. *It may be well ahead of time (normal word order).*
It may well be ahead of time (probably): idiomatic expression.

> ➤ **Figurativeness**

The basic characteristic of idiomatic expressions is that the words are used metaphorically. Therefore, the surface structure has a little role to play in understanding the meaning of the whole expression. For example, in *'to bury the hatchet',* meaning to become friendly again after a disagreement, the meanings of the words *'to bury'* and. *'the hatchet'* are different from the meaning of the whole expression.

> **Phrasal Verbs**

Phrasal verbs are the most common type of idioms in English. Many of them carry idiomatic meanings that cannot be inferred from the form, unless the phrase is already known.

E.g. *After war began, the two countries broke off diplomatic relations* (discontinue).

Most automobile companies bring out new modals each year (to show or introduce).

According to Baker (1992:63), there can be identified some grammatical and syntactic restrictions of idioms, i.e. a speaker or a writer cannot normally do any of the following with an idiom because the meaning would be changed:

❖ **Addition→** Adding any word to an idiomatic expression may alter its meaning, or remove its idiomatic sense. For instance, adding the adverb *very* to the adjective *red* in *red herring*.

   (*very red herring) affects the figurativeness of its meaning completely*.*

❖ **Deletion→** Deleting the adjective *sweet* and the article *the* from the expressions *have a sweet tooth* and *spill the beans* would change totally their meanings. Hence, (*have a tooth) and (*spill beans) have no idiomatic sense.

❖ **Substitution→** Idioms accept no replacement of words even if those words are synonyms.

For example, *the long and short of it* means the basic facts of a situation. The adjective *long* cannot be substituted by another adjective, like *tall*, despite they have nearly the same meaning.

❖ **Modification→** Any change in the grammatical structure of an idiom leads to the destruction of the idiom meaning. For instance, the expression (**stock and barrel lock*) is no more idiomatic because of the altered order of the items in the expression *lock, stock and barrel* completely.

❖ **Comparative→** Adding the comparative form *-er* to the adjective *hot* in the expression *be in hot water* changes the conventional sense of the idiom which has the meaning of *be in trouble.*

❖ **Passive→** The passive form *some beans were spilled* has a different meaning from its active one.

These restrictions affect the degree of idiomacity of lexical items, and they may remove their main feature of figurativeness. These characteristics make the idioms be considered as rigid structures, almost impossible to be decoded. However, through a cautious approach, thorough explanations, continuous interest, idioms may become vital elements in the acquisition of proficiency in a foreign language.

Researchers interested in idioms have tried to classify them according to different criteria. The main feature that differentiates between the different kinds of idioms is the degree of idiomacity that an idiom carries. Idioms are categorized in a continuum from transparent to opaque called *the spectrum of idiomacity*. Therefore, idioms can be divided into :

✓ **Transparent-Opaque Idioms** which include:

o **Transparent Idioms**

These idioms have a very close meaning to that of the literal one. Hence, transparent idioms are usually not difficult to understand and translate, because their meanings can be easily inferred from the meanings of their constituents, both components have a direct meaning but the combination acquires figurative sense. (Fernando 1996) Phraseological combinations are commonly included in this category.

E.g. *to see the light = to understand*

o **Semi - Transparent Idioms**

The idiom usually carries a metaphorical sense that could not be known only through common use. i.e., the meaning of its parts has a little role to play in understanding the entire meaning.

E.g. *break the ice = relieve the tension*

o **Semi-Opaque Idioms**

This type refers to those idioms in which the figurative meaning is not joined to that of the constituent words of the idiom. Thus, the expression is separated into two parts; a part with a literal meaning, and another part with a figurative sense. Phraseological unities belong to this category.

E.g. *to know the ropes = to know how a particular job should be done*

to pass the buck = to pass responsibility

o **Opaque Idioms**

Opaque idioms are the most difficult type of idioms, because the meaning of the idiom is never that of the sum of the literal meanings of its parts. So, it would be impossible to infer the actual meaning of the idiom from the meanings of its components, because of the presence of items having cultural references. These culture-specific items have a great influence on the comprehensibility of idiomatic expressions.

E.g. *To burn one's boat = to make retreat impossible.*

Kick the bucket = to die

Spill the beans = reveal a secret

According to Jennifer Seidl and W. McMordie, idioms may be classified into:

- **Informal Idioms**

Such as: *a mug's game | alive and kicking | at sixes and sevens | by the book | catch it | come/turn up trumps | cook someone's goose | daylight robbery | do a bunk | every nook and cranny | face the music | fly off the handle | for my money | forty winks | go places | go through the roof | go to the dogs | have a soft spot for | hit the bottle | in spades | like a shot | live it up | make noises | mum's the word | mutton dressed (up) as lamb | no end | not to mention | on cloud nine | on the mend | on top of the world | over the hill | play cat and mouse | rock the boat | send someone packing | sleep like a log | under the weathere and kicking | at sixes and sevens|*

- **Formal Idioms**

Such as: *as regards | in the first instance | on either/every hand | on production of | root and branch/ catch it | come/turn up trumps | cook someone's goose | daylight robbery | do a bunk | eook an*

- **Verbal Idioms**

Such as: *break even | burn the midnight oil | call a halt | catch it | catch sight of | come/turn up trumps | cook someone's goose | do a bunk | err on the side of something | excel oneself | face the music | fetch and carry | find fault | fit (someone) like a glove | fly off the handle | go from bad to worse | go places | go through the roof | go to the dogs | groan inwardly | have a soft spot for | hear a pin drop | hit the bottle | hold the line | jog someone's memory | keep a straight face | know better | let the cat out of the bag | live from hand to mouth | live it up | look a gift horse in the mouth | make fun of | make noises | oil the wheels | pick and choose | play cat and mouse | play second fiddle | pull the strings | raise eyebrows | rest on one's laurels | rise to the occasion | rock the boat | send someone packing | sleep like a log | stand on ceremony | stop the rot | take the bull by the horns | throw the baby out with the bath water | vote with one's feet | work to rule*

- **Idiomatic Pairs**

→**Pairs of adjectives**

born and bred | bright and early | safe and sound | black and blue | high and dry| fair and square;

→**Pairs of nouns**

aches and pains | bits and pieces | body and soul | hustle and bustle | ifs and buts| life and limb | man to man | odds and ends | peace and parcel | ups and downs

→**Pairs of adverbs**

far and wide | first and foremost | here, there and everywhere/on and off

→**Pairs of verbs**

do and die | fetch and carry | pick and choose | wait and see | wine and dine | sink and swim

→**Identical pairs**

again and again | all in all | Bit by bit | little by little | Step by step | round and round

- **Idioms Used in Special Fields**

Banking
Open /close a bank account | take out a loan | take out a mortgage | pay in cash/by cheque | on credit charge something to a credit card

Business
A business runs at a profit or runs at a loss;
If a business makes neither a profit nor a loss it breaks even;
You open (up)/ set up a business or you go into business;
You close down a business/ go out of business;
A single person who runs a business is a sole trader;
A sleeping partner is a person who provides a percentage of the capital of a business but who does not play a part in its management;
If a person cannot pay his debts he is said to go bankrupt or go bust (informal)

Buying and selling
Shop around =compare prices at different shops
Go window-shopping = you only look at the goods in the shop window;
Buy in bulk = you buy in large quantities at a cheaper price;
You may take goods on approval = buy goods that you can return soon after the purchase date if you are not satisfied;
You may buy something on high purchase = pay in weekly or monthly installments;
You may run up an account bill (with a shop/ firm) = buy goods on credit;
A shopkeeper may put prices up and sometimes bring prices down;
A shop-lifter is a person who steals from shops while pretending to be a customer;
A small business may be run on a 'shoe –string' = with very low maintenance costs;
To bring something under the hammer is to sell it by auction;

Politics and Law
Be in power/ hold office/ be defeated/ rejected/ thrown out/win/lose a, his seat;

Telephoning
Give someone a ring/make a business call/ get through/ hold the line;

Travel
Go on holiday/ vacation/ set off on a journey/ make an overnight stop/ travel first class/ go through customs/ charter flight;

Health , Illness, Death
Catch a cold/ pass away/ catch a disease/ to feel under the weather;

- **Idioms related to special themes**

Anger	**Speed**
Fly off the handle/ go through the roof;	*like a shot;*

Deterioration	Success
Go from bad to worse/ over the hill;	go places
Happiness	**Surprise**
On cloud nine/ on top of the world;	raise eyebrows
Wealth	

in the lap of luxury/ live it up

- **Idioms containing special keywords**

Animals

a dog's life | (as) blind as a bat | cook someone's goose | crocodile tears | go to the dogs | let the cat out of the bag | look a gift horse in the mouth | mutton dressed (up) as lamb | play cat and mouse | take the bull by the horns | the lion's share

Parts of the body

cap in hand | keep a straight face | live from hand to mouth | neck and neck | on either/every hand | raise eyebrows | vote with one's feet | (with) (one's) tongue in (one's) cheek | with open arms

Colours

In black and white/ go off into the blue/ a blue-collar worker/ once in a blue moon/ green with envy/ have green fingers/ as red as beetroot/as white as a sheet/ a white lie;

Clothes

Fit someone like a glove/ cap in hand;

Time

Day by day/ an off day/ name the day/ on the spur of the moment/ a night cap/ a night owl/ be on time/ be pressed for time/ kill time / behind the times/ keep up with the times;

- **Idioms with Comparisons**

Comparisons with as…….as

as blind as a bat/ as brown as a berry/ as cold as ice/ as dry as a bone/ as different as chalk and cheese/ as fit as a fiddle/ as light as a feather/ as quick as lightning/ as tough as leather;

Comparisons with like

drink like a fish/ eat like a horse/ go like the wind/ smoke like a chimney (Seidl and McMordie 1988:155-238)

According to Fernando (1996: 35-36), idioms can be grouped into three sub-classes: *pure idioms*, *semi-idioms* and *literal idioms*.

- **Pure idioms**

A pure idiom a type of *conventionalized, non-literal multiword expression* whose meaning cannot be understood by adding up the meanings of the words that make up the phrase**.** For example the expression *spill the beans* is a pure idiom, because its real meaning has nothing to do with beans.

- **Semi-idioms**

A semi-pure, on the other hand, has at least one literal element and one with a non-literal meaning**.** For example *Foot the bill (*i.e. *pay)* is one example of a semi-idiom, in which *foot* is the non-literal element, whereas the word *bill* is used literally.

- **Literal idioms**

Literal idioms, such as *on foot* or *on the contrary* are semantically less complex than the other two, and therefore easier to understand even if one is not familiar with these expressions.

These expressions may be considered idioms because they are either completely invariant or allow only restricted variation. Fernando (1996:37) admits the difficulty of drawing a clear boundary between these three idiom types.

Taking into consideration the function of the phrase, Halliday (1985, as quoted by Fernando 1996:72) groups idioms into ideational, interpersonal and relational idioms.

- **Ideational idioms**

Ideational idioms *either signify message content, experiential phenomena including the sensory, the affective, and the evaluative, or they characterize the nature of the message* (Fernando 1996:72). These expressions may describe:

> - actions (*tear down, spill the beans*),
> - events (*turning point),*
> - situations *(be in a pickle),*
> - people and things *(a red herring),*
> - attributes (*cut-and-dried),* evaluations (*a watched pot never boils)*
> - emotions (*green with envy).*

- **Interpersonal idioms**

Interpersonal idioms on the other hand, 'fulfil either an interactional function or they characterize the nature of the message': they can, for instance, initiate or keep up an interaction between people and maintain politeness (Fernando 1996:73). These expressions include:

> - greetings and farewells (*good morning),*
> - directives (*let's face it),*
> - agreements (*say no more*),
> - "feelers" which elicit opinions *(what do you think?*) and
> - rejections (*come off it).*

- **Relational idioms**

Halliday (1985:74) distinguishes relational (or textual) idioms**,** which ensure that the discourse is cohesive and coherent. Examples of relational idioms are *on the contrary, in addition to* and *on the other hand.*

Other classifications of idioms are more detailed and complicated. According to Strässler (1982:42), Adam Makkai's book *Idiom structure in English* (1972) is the most extensive work ever written on idioms. Makkai (1972:117) identifies two major types of idioms: those of *encoding* and those of *decoding*. Makkai (1972:117) classifies idioms of decoding into *lexemic* and *sememic* idioms.

- **Idioms of Encoding (Identifiable)**

Idioms of encoding are those idiosyncratic lexical combinations that have transparent meanings. This type of idioms could be best recognized through making a comparison between

different languages by the use of proper prepositions. Therefore, 'at' is used instead of „with"
in the English expression 'drive at 70 mph' (not drive with as in French).

● **Idioms of Decoding (Non-Identifiable)**

Idioms of decoding refer to those non-identifiable and misleading lexical expressions
whose interpretation could not be figured out by using only independently learned linguistic
conventions. They include expressions like „beat around the bush" and 'fly off the handle'. This
type of idioms could be classified into lexemic and sememic.

⚓ **Lexemic idioms** include:

   a. Phrasal verbs: e.g., *to come up with, to turn off, to take part in.*
   b. Phrasal compounds: e.g. *black ice, black board.*
   c. Incorporating Verbs: e.g. *man-handle.*
   d. Pseudo-Idioms: e.g. *spick and span, kit and kin*

⚓ **Sememic Idioms**, on the other hand, usually, convey pragmatic meanings related to a

particular culture. They include:
   a. Proverbs: e.g. *Chew of something over, A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.*
   b. Familiar Quotations: e.g. *Not a mouse stirring*

McCarthy and O'Dell (2003:06) give another classification to the English idioms types
focusing on their possible combinations:
-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 + a noun).
As dry as a bone (= Very dry indeed)
-Binominal (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)
Conclusions

Although a distinguished form of non-literal language, idioms may also be regarded
from the figurativeness point of view. The structure and the possible restrictions in the form
and use give idioms an aspect of grammaticality well defined.

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