

IDIOMS AS LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

All idioms have at least two meanings; the linguistic meaning of the words and phrases themselves, and the stipulated idiomatic meaning. The meaning of idioms can be acquired, while that of the familiar idioms could either be retrieved or transformationally generated. Retrieval would be accomplished by direct access to stipulated idiomatic meaning, while generation would be realized by ordinary linguistic processing by applying the contextually suitable idiomatic meanings of the constituent words. This article exploits issues which concern idioms as linguistic expressions. It deals largely with those tenets of idioms as linguistic phenomena. Thus, it focuses on salient data on the

structure and meanings of idioms which were collected for linguistic analysis. Among others, the work covers idiomatic creativity, polysemous hypothesis, concept of minimalism, phrase versus words, semantic compatibility consideration, anaphoric referent, idiomatic variants, morphotactic and idioms allowable combination, infixational elements and idiomatic compound. The work adopts canonical theory of idiomatic analysis.

Keywords: Canonical, Competence, Idioms, Linguistic Performance.

Introduction

The issue of idiomatic processing that goes on in the brain as regards syntactic operation of idioms is in summary a matter of creativity. Whatsoever it may be, idioms as linguistic operations are formulated words that in turn form phrases and sentences. Caciariand Tabossi (1993:6) uphold that "people cannot inhibit their language-processing system". If truly, someone attends to a word, for instance, they cannot ignore the word's meaning. To this end, it is pertinent to see that even if people are asked explicitly to ignore a word's meaning, as in troop's, classical colour naming experiment, the meaning still passes through. Users of idioms who try to name the colour of the ink that a colour's name is printed in, are momentarily delayed when the colour name and ink differ. Sustaining the automaticity of language processing system, it is not in any way magical to lay hands on evidence for the ubiquity of lexical and syntactic operations during idiom comprehension to ensure adequacy of competence and performance. Linguistic competence and performance (Chomsky, 1957, Collins (2008:94), Radford (2003:17) and Chomsky (1966).

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In another development, a somewhat similar submission was presented by Cacciari and Tobossi (1988), thus linguistic processing and idiom trace-up can occur in parallel, see parallel construction in Quirk (2006:412), Aliyu (2010:156), Eka (2004:194), but the idiom look-up (trace-up) cannot stand until the idiom itself is recognized as a configuration, which means that it must be a unitary expression with special meaning which goes beyond that of its constituents. Ogungbe and Bossan (2008), Pietro (1971) and Fraser (1974), regard idiom as a single constituent or series of constituents whose semantic interpretation is independent of the formative which compose it. Similarly, Hockett (1958:171), defines an idiom in a broader way as "a grammatical form which has a meaning that cannot be deduced from its structure and he thus includes pronouns, proper names, figures of speech, phrasal compound and abbreviation as parts of idioms.

Phrases versus Words

Perhaps one of the most challenging cases for idioms is that of long words reproduction as idiomatic form e.g by and large. Experimentally, such words can be negative, as in:

Zakeri: By and large, the market seems to be doing well.

Neg: Not so by and large: Have you seen the latest unemployment figure in Nigeria?

When an idiom's constituents carry functional relations to the idiom's meaning, then operations such as antonyms, quantification and negation will be productive so long as the plausibility communicative intent can be deduced (Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1991). The change from plural to singular in Donald Barthelme's essay "convicted minimalist spills bean" for example is productive because of the relation between the singular content of the noun bean and the concept of minimalism. In the same way, the phrase "popped the question" would normally not be easy to interpret because one usually proposes marriage to one person at a time.

Sometimes, idioms point at nominal construction with exclamations.

"O, he sits high in"

all the people's hearts (referring to Caesar).

Meaning that Caesar is popular. (Complete work of Shakespeare, Julius Caesar (588.) Moreso, the phrase-induced polysemous hypothesis can be summarized quite briefly summarized as the constituent words of familiar idioms which are normally acquired through repeated use of idiomatic contexts; such as suitable meanings for the idioms as they appeared and are being tackled in certain contexts.

After these phrases, specific meanings have been accomplished, then the idiom variants that preserve the relationships among the constituent idiomatic concepts can be perfectly understood through ordinary linguistic processing. Based on this, idiomatic variants can be understood exactly as literal expressions are understood, by accessing context-appropriate parameter via constituent word meanings by identifying the syntactic and semantic relations among the constituents to mark linguistic expressions.

Fully, compositional idiom consists of constituents units, and the constituent units can be adequately mapped directly onto their respective idiomatic referents. In general, an idiom that allows word-to-word referent mapping will express n-argument predicants, where $N > 1$, as in spill the beans. In contrast, constituent words in less compositional idiomatic usage such as "kick the bucket" cannot be mapped individually in a one-to-one fashion to the idiom's meaning of "die", only the phrase as a whole can be mapped. This is so because it is linguistically impossible to have a one-to-one mapping system from a multi-word constituent to a single argument predicate; such idiom constituents would not develop

phrase-induced idiomatic meanings. Traditionally, such idiom types generally will not be used in variant forms. Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting (1989) report data constituents with its argument. It is on this note that less compositional idioms are less flexible both lexically and syntactically than the more compositional ones. (Gibbs, Nayak 1989).

Semantic Compatibility Effects and Tailoring the forms

Do words Really Matter?

When we express our minds, the brain is buried in thinking. Our expressions range from mere speech sounds oh! Ush!, letter "B", "O", "Z" Words: man, sheep, come, green "slowly", phrases in the garden, on the sea, at home, clauses- my name is Onuchenyo, Egypt is in Africa. It goes on down to compound complex sentences through double and complex sentences (Mansur 2012:77, Quirk 2006:309).

Some phrasal idioms seem odd when synonyms are substituted for the original words, and so, many cannot even be recognized as idioms; for example, people rarely realize that "boot the pail" is a paraphrase of "kick the bucket" (Gibbs, Nayak & Cutting, 1989). Other phrase idioms, especially those that are compositional in nature, can suitably survive lexical substitution but the substitution is constrained jointly by the idiom's meaning of the selected words themselves.

Another one is the idiom "Break the ice" which refers to more or less discrete events that results in a relaxation of a stiff, in chilly social situation. Thus, substituting the word crack for break in this expression is relatively acceptable. By a way of contrast, the words crush, grid or share would not be acceptable in this idiom, even though these actions are fittingly appropriate to the real object, ice. The linguistic yoke which comes in question form is that – can the proverbial ice be melted? Another one is "cook your words well in case you are called to eat them up". Can words be cooked? For ice, perhaps, if a gradual change in the social atmosphere were involved, such action might be a reality. But potentially, these illustrations prove the roles of literal meaning in idiomatic use and comprehension (Onucheyo 2015:26), (Dascal 1987), Lacking and Fillmore, 1979).

Lexical substitutions are not only possible but are also contrasted semantically. Precisely, it is based on the fact that idioms must be processed that is not a

yardstick for determining the meanings of idioms.

Semantic Constraints on the use of Idioms

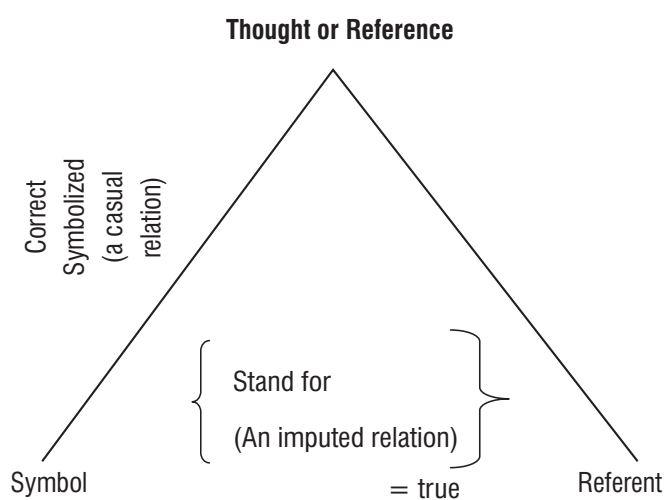
Several idioms in English resist lexical substitutions. For instance, the idioms such as “onions” as in “he knows his onions”, also “kick the bucket” as in “die” tend to resist their constituents which may still play important roles in their use and comprehension.

- Comprehension-Competence
- Use – Performance

The most striking aspect of linguistic competence is what we may call the creativity of language, that is, the speaker's ability to produce new sentences, sentences that are immediately understood by other speakers although they bear no physical resemblance to sentences which are familiar (Chomsky 1966:11).

Again, even though there is no clear relation between the meaning of the expression such as “kick the bucket” and the concept “to die” words meaning and idiomatic meaning may still interact to guide and constrain the use of idiom.

The triangle of meaning by Ogden and Richard (1923) cited in Saeed (2006) and Palmer (1996:24, 1949)



Adopted from Ogden, C.K & Richards, I. A (1923:10)

For certain linguistic consideration, as users of idiom, our understanding about what it means to die, guides and constrains the use of idiom- “kick the bucket” (Cacciariand Tobassi 1993:7). We can build in certain

grammatical adverbial movement into such idiomatic use stylistically.

- 1 a. Cook your words because you might be called to eat them up.
- b. Cook your words carefully because you might be called upon to eat them up (The two mine).
- 2 a. He kicked the bucket.
- b. He silently kicked the bucket. Glucksberg (1978).

In an elaboration term, there is an in-built special meaning that one could derive from “cooking of words carefully” differently from mere “cooking of words”. Similarly, people can die silently and thus it makes sense to say, “she silently kicked the bucket”. People, in the past, present, have not and cannot die “sharply”. Though, one does the physical (non-idiomatic) kicking of an object sharply, yet one cannot say “she sharply kicked the bucket”. On the other hand, the meaning of the words “kick” and “bucket” can play important roles in the expression. As it is here, the action kicking is a discrete act, and so, even one can say, “she lay dying all week”, one cannot say “she lay kicking the bucket all week” (Wasow, Sag & Numberg 1983). The reality of this is that the only way one can kick a bucket all week is to kick it repeatedly (i.e) to kick it over and over again. The real death is once.

What is the truth condition of the bucket? I mean the one used in discourse, the idiomatic bucket behave just as would any other discourse referent, as shown by its availability marking anaphoric referent (Anaphora = Akmajian *etal.* 2003:48).

Consider the following conversational segments:

Dr. Obed: did the old woman kick the bucket last night?

Prof Ikonne: No, he barely nudges it.

Judging from the angle of context, the relation of “nudge” to “kick” and the use of pronoun “it” to refer to bucket is clearly interpretable. Nudge as it denotes to coming too close to kicking it, and due to this, the variation is taken to symbolize “close to dying”, furthermore, to build on this example, the concept of death and the semantics of idioms constituent jointly constraint the idiom you mean and its comprehension, featuring in joint sharing of idiom meaning and the language itself. Nudge i.e to touch or push something, to push gradually or to make something move to

particular value (cf Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 1998:793, BBC English Dictionary 1992).

Theoretical Framework

Idiomatic accessibility and its linguistic processing has familiar and original evidence that are straight forwardly linked to Canonical Theory. By canonical, we mean that idioms are clearly understood more quickly than their variants. (Mc- Glone, et al.

Starting from the consideration that the idiosyncratic nature of idioms is a lexical property in some senses and that this idiosyncrasy should be stated only once, and not to be repeated for all the variant forms in which the idioms may appear, the theory adopts some level of linguistic representation provided by the theory at the canonical level which initiates a normal form to which all different occurrences of the idioms can be reduced. Based on this fact, the properties of the idiom can be the theory of syntactic variation which usually permits alternative variant forms Chomsky (1980) and the notion of internal modification of components as antecedents Gazdar et.al, (1985).

1. Joan {vp (v kicked) (NP the bucket)}, and
2. Joan {vp (v kettle) (man) (p for) NP (Antonio)}

Will be re-analysed lexically as:

3. Joan {vp (kicked the bucket)} and
4. Joan {vp (v kettled Lilian for) (NP Antonio)}

It is realized this way with idiomatic meanings being assigned as those of newly produced complex.

V: kick the bucket “die”, kettle is “deceived” when Lillian believed what she says. The original syntactic structures are retained through allowing syntactic variation.

Idiom Variations and Semantic Productivity

The productivity of a word or an expression is found within the linguistic environment in which a word or an expression avails itself to different linguistic operations. So, when familiar a word are used as variants of their canonical forms, the distinction between original and new wordings may create the beginning of newly formed idiomatic meanings. If for example, someone were to say "crack the ice" instead of "break the ice", the....to mean a paraphrase in a social situation, no particular communicative intent could be noticed. Crack and break would be employed

as mere stylistic variants of the same form. Another variation could also be seen in the idiom: “Carry coal to Newcastle”

“Carry coal to Okaba”

Linguistically, the substitution of Newcastle with Okaba is noticeable and that has made the idiom another expression of its original form. (cf Onucheyo, 2015:113). Again, what if from another dimension, someone were to say “shatter the ice” then this would not be interpreted as a mere stylistic variant. But it spells that the difference between the meaning of "break" and the meaning of "shatter" of course is formulated as new idiomatic meaning which goes the same way with an expression like “break down a system”.

All these semantically productive idiomatic variants appear in our everyday expressions and in the media. One conspicuous examples came up in New YorkTimes Articles on the rise and fall of Wall street firm Drexel Burham Lambert (Drexel). The Drexels have made themselves so fortunate on junx bonds and then prized themselves seriously to be running out of cash. In this regard, “Drexel senior executives not contented with collecting one golden egg after another, have insisted on eating the goose”. The same way Donald Barthelme's title for an essay on contemporary literature- "convicted minimalist spills bean" brings perfect sense.

Idioms as Economy of Words

Idioms as economy of words demonstrate how expressions are contracted through the use of words. This is technically referred to as Word economy. For details, see the following examples.

Idioms	Meaning
Badform	bad manners
Badpeny	a worthless person
Hermetically sealed	sealed closely and perfectly so as to exclude air
Jezebel	a devilish woman who paints her face
Good Samaritan (Good Nigerian)	To be kind, trustworthy and compassionate to someone in distress Alteregeo close and intimate friend (Latin) word.

Syntactic Structure of Lexical Idioms

To further illustrate linguistic expressions, Onucheyo (2015:29) and Lamb, (1980) observe that idioms are designed for connections to the morphemic syntax or morphotactic which plays the linguistic role of displaying allowable combinations of morphemes as in the following examples.

- a. Under+go = undergo *gounder
- b. Cat+walk = catwalk *walkcat
- c. Under+dog = underdog *dogunder

But in spite of certain linguistic networks, if not to be eagerly caught up in the linguistic web with regards to words which allow neutral formation in the structure of words and their allowable combination. For instance:

- a. Fire+wood = firewood or woodfire
- b. Sugar+cane = sugarcane or canesugar

Noun Phrase Structure of Idioms

Indeed it is also an obvious matter that some idioms display NP = head, thereby showing determiner + noun (det+n) = Noun phrase (N.P). Akmajian (2003:159-162), Wokoma (2000:8).

- = A bird of passage: Person who travels widely
e.g My Father is a bird of passage
- = A bull in a China shop: An unnecessary person or evil
e.g Leigo is a bull in a China shop because she creates tension among us with her hot arguments.

As linguists, expressions such as the idioms above show phrasal movement i.e the structure of the two idioms contain = determiner “a” + the head word “bird” and “bull” respectively.

But for idioms: Evil genius and fair play. They both display adjectival structure. What kind of Genius? = the evil type. And succinctly express honestly or honest approach, we can say fair play. For example; If you really want to succeed in this life, you must take the path of fair play.

Another salient point is that there is an agreement (concord) between the determiner and the subject Ogungbe and Bossan (200:50). By its word order, it is not grammatical to say play fair to the idiom nor but definitely and if at all is to continue to be meaningful, then the statusquo of “fair play” become the only automatic ordering of the idiom. Similarly, the idiom “A nine-day-wonder” which shows and infixational

element has its meaning as (short lived or a temporary thing) e.g life is a nine-day-wonder. A talk-talk which shows repetition means a boastful talk; and its reduplication in terms of its linguistic expression.

Ogungbe & Bossan (2008:206), Rajeer (2011) present idioms such as silly-shally (indecision or unable to take decision), U-turn (changing of focus to opposite direction), status quo (to remain unchanged), arm-lock (force to do), thick-skinned (not affected by criticism). All of the above idioms are clear instances of idiomatic compounds. It is a linguistic matter because by compounding, we mean a linguistic operation whereby two elements, the second of which is usually a noun combine with the first word to produce a single linguistic meaning. According to Zandevort (1968:227).

English, like other Germanic languages, has a great many examples of vocables which, though felt and used as single words, are made up of two or more elements each of which may also be used as separate word. Such vocables are called compounds.

Compound occurs among all word class elements, with the exception of articles. Some of the instances will be given logical enumeration such as goldsmith, seastick, myself, overcome, someone, into, wherever, high-ho, twenty-five. Again, it is possible to have compounds made up of more than two elements: son-in-law, chief-in-council, maid-of-all-work, never-the-less, two-and-twenty. They are mainly nouns, adverbs and numerals. In a related development, compounds, in contrast as regard noun phrases like blackbird, earth-quake, earthworm, earth-tremor, waiting-room, greenfly, fire-extinguisher are stressed on the first element but with a strong secondary stress on the second elements Quirk and Greenbaum (2000:452).

Conclusion

The meanings of idiom is acquired. Linguists such as Makkai, Numberge, Gluckberge etc suggest that idiom meaning are acquired by stipulation. Therefore, the meaning of an idiom is learned simply as an arbitrary relation between a phrase and its meaning, just as the meaning of a word is learned as an arbitrary relation between a linguistic unit and is used as referent to pin down meaning. There are thus semantic as well as pragmatic constraints on idioms use that is beyond the

scope of mere paraphrase. This constituent reveals the possession of more knowledge of idioms than simple paraphrases. Of course, the simply adopt such knowledge and interpretative paths (in line with similarity, analogical transfer, interferences, semiotic relations etc) only when necessary and that is clearly of unfamiliar idioms (that might be reasonably seen as metaphorical in nature). Usually, idioms function in several linguistic capacities and without any iota of doubt, they have been fully considered as linguistic items. Idioms, apart from being rooted in symbolization and being semantically rich, they also pitch tents with idiomatic usage and interpretations. It is for the sake of these that Makkai (1968:411) maintains that “idioms are group of words or sentences whose meanings differs from their literal meanings”. The resourceful mechanism as regard the functionality of idioms can be a useful linguistic tool to achieve various communicative functions with semantic significations.

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