

Idioms: The Case for the Defense

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Abstract

Language uses both data – which must be learned piece-by-piece, and computation – which can be widely generalised. It seems to be accepted, both by theoretical linguists and by language teachers, that there are quite distinct components within the language mechanism which mirror this split ('vocabulary' versus 'grammar'; 'the lexicon' versus 'syntax'; 'words' versus 'rules'). On closer examination, the boundaries are less obvious than they first appear. This complexity is highlighted by the 'phrasal idioms'. Idioms, like 'words', carry idiosyncratic meanings. Yet in other ways they behave like ordinary phrases or sentences. Idioms are widespread in language and frequently encountered in everyday speech. Yet the treatment they receive in EFL / ESL textbooks is often strangely dismissive. Many linguists are also happy to consign idioms to the 'prison of the lexicon'. In this paper, I would like to argue that idioms have been falsely imprisoned. They are in fact peculiarly useful, as well as important, in language teaching. They may also mirror some of the mechanisms involved in first language acquisition by children.

Introduction

English speakers of my own generation needed, in adulthood, to learn the meaning of a new verb 'to email'. We did not, however, need

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to be told its past tense, nor to have its third-person singular form explained to us. More subtly, as soon as we heard the word, we knew that we could ‘email someone the information’ (but not ‘cellphone someone the information’). Clearly, language uses both atomic data which must be learned piece-by-piece, and a system of computation which can be widely generalised. The question of where, exactly, the boundary between them lies is an important one in second language acquisition. The answer is more elusive than might first appear, and the ‘phrasal idioms’ illustrate the subtlety quite neatly.

Words and Rules

The most impressive trick of language is the “infinite use of finite media.” Our ‘knowledge’ of language must contain a mechanism capable of generating an unlimited range of meanings within the finite space of the human brain. Clahsen and Almazan (1998, p. 167) describe such a mechanism as comprising “... two separate components, a lexicon of stored entries and a computational system of combinatorial operations to form larger units.”

The most familiar example of a ‘stored entry’ is the individual ‘word’. I return to the definition of the term ‘word’ below. As a first approximation, it here means a group of sounds which is used within a given language community to label a particular object (or action, feeling, characteristic, etc). Saussure established the dogma of *l’arbitraire du signe*: that there is nothing in the *sound* of a word that will reveal its meaning to a non-speaker (de Saussure, 1915/1966). Words that sound similar may not have – indeed are not expected to have – similar meanings, and the fact that words may be phonetic minimal pairs, yet carry wildly divergent meanings, is the basis of much humour. Spoonerisms such as: ‘Sew these ladies to their sheets’, minimal transpositions wreak havoc at the semantic level.

A typical estimate is that reasonably well-educated English speakers know around 60,000 words (Pinker, 1994). While this is an impressive number it is not, of course, infinite. What gives language its *infinite* capacity is the ability to combine those lexical items into larger

units. The human brain (in the case of young children, at least) seems to be pre-configured for such a ‘words and rules’ model. Children correctly predict that words will be ‘arbitrary’; mere phonetic similarities between ‘cat’ and ‘bat’ do not tempt them into swatting baseballs with the family pet (and this is not as obvious as it may seem – comparable visual clues can tempt children into foolhardy guesses about, say, cats and rabbits).

Conversely, children expect their ‘target language’ to contain rules that will be widely applied. Having acquired such rules – for example the use of regular inflectional suffixes to form English past tenses – they readily extend them to new words. Indeed, children (and some adult L2 learners) are inclined to apply rules *too* widely, passing through a developmental stage in which dominant past tense forms displace irregular forms that were previously used, so that the incorrect form ‘**hold -> holded**’ is substituted for the already-acquired – and correct – ‘**held**’ (Pinker, 1999; Stemberger, 2001).

Idioms and Words

Idioms are part of a wider group of fixed expressions that, in different accounts, includes clichés, quotations, compounds (‘frequent flyer program’), proper names, book titles, etc. All these expressions exhibit “a fixed form that does not change” and “meanings that are not always obvious.” I intend here to take a more restricted view of the term ‘idiom’, limiting it to an expression “... whose meaning cannot be taken as a combination of the meanings of its component parts.” Clichés like ‘the *tragic death* of...’, and compounds like ‘black and white film’ are often encountered as a unit, but they present no special difficulty of interpretation.

Idioms can be syntactic units ranging from compounds (‘dark horse’), through binomials (‘down and out’) to units of phrase- or sentence-length. Far from being rare oddities, idioms have a major role in language use. Jackendoff (1995) estimates that there are around 25,000 such fixed expressions in English, and a similar number in French. They are also frequently deployed by native speakers; Danesi (1994) estimates that average native English speakers produce around 3,000 such ‘fixed expressions’ each week. If these estimates are accurate, idioms are

almost as common as the ‘words’ that are widely taken by language textbooks to constitute the vocabulary of a language.

‘Words’ are more complicated to define. In his popular account of language, Pinker (1994) distinguishes between two definitions:

- *Syntactic atom*: “an entity that the rules of syntax cannot separate or arrange”
- *Listeme*: “a rote memorised...string of linguistic stuff”

Other linguists, with other agendas, identify a more numerous range of definitions. The ‘listeme’ definition is, however, widely used, and many linguists seem confident that idioms fall within the scope of this definition. Pinker is categorical that idioms are listemes, a view shared by Di Sculio and Williams (1987).

Idioms and Rules

If idioms are listemes, what might we predict about their behaviour? Di Sculio and Williams (1987) describe the lexicon as a ‘prison’, whose inhabitants share nothing but their lawlessness. What kind of lawlessness is this, and how does it apply to the idioms? A key point is that idioms, if they are simply rote memorized as complete units, might be expected to resist syntactic processes associate with phrase or sentence structure. The fact that idioms are composed by gluing together other lexical units (‘strings of linguistic stuff’) is not, in itself, remarkable. Many English ‘syntactic atoms’ – ‘toothpaste’, ‘download’, ‘runaway’, ‘nosejob’ – transparently have such a structure. In these cases, the component words resist the morphology that they would accept or require when standing alone. For example, morphologically embedded verbs resist tense:

She is a runaway

She was a runaway

[*] She is a ranaway – [*] marks an ungrammatical construction

Do idioms behave like this? Embick and Marantz (2000, p. 1) observe that “if ‘kick the bucket’ is a lexical unit ... one would expect

the regular rule to yield *kick the bucketed*." Clearly, this is not how the real idiom behaves. Despite the complete obscurity of its surface meaning (far more obscure than run + away = runaway), the idiom behaves in many ways like any other verb phrase: **kick the bucket -> kicked the bucket**. Indeed, not only do verbs within idiom strings accept such treatment, they (usually) demand the *same* treatment as verbs in normally grammatical phrases. Thus, verbs with irregular past tenses demand the irregular form: **buy the farm -> bought the farm**. The same is true of noun plurals: **his nose to the grindstone -> their noses to the grindstone** (c.f. **his nosejob -> their nosejobs - [*]nosesjobs**).

Idioms accept other types of treatment that are typical of phrase grammar, rather than of word-level morphology. In the case of 'syntactical atoms', adjectives or adverbs can only be applied to the whole unit. Their embedded morphemes, whilst remaining completely 'visible', resist even perfectly sensible modification, requiring Sensodyne toothpaste to be referred to by the periphrastic 'toothpaste for sensitive teeth', rather than the more direct 'sensitive toothpaste'. Many idioms, in contrast, accept insertion in an absolutely standard manner: **the shit promptly hit the fan; he shot massive holes in my argument**.

The apparently odd behaviour of idioms is related to a controversial question in linguistics: the exact relationship between syntax and meaning. McGinnis (n.d., p. 5) observes that:

It is generally acknowledged that words are associated with two types of semantic information, which Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1998) call the structural and idiosyncratic components of meaning. The structural component of meaning interacts with the syntax, while the idiosyncratic component makes fine-grained distinctions that are irrelevant to the syntax.

The subtleties of this debate are beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant is that, in the case of idioms, syntactic behaviour and semantic content can be treated separately.

he shot *methodological* holes in my argument
he identified *methodological* flaws in my argument
! he dug *methodological* holes in my garden

When the adjectives here are mapped onto the NP '**holes in my argument**' the type of adjectives the noun accepts are those appropriate to the 'parent' noun phrase ('flaws in my argument'), rather than the noun that is actually instantiated in the sentence ('holes'). Meaning seems to 'percolate up' from the non-idiomatic phrase. At the same time, however, "... the syntax of the non-idiomatic version of the phrase directly maps to the syntax of the idiomatic phrase" (Ifill, 2002, p. 11). Thus, if **shoot holes in x** has a one-to-one syntactic mapping with the non-idiomatic phrase **identify flaws in x**, the idiom can be analysed according to same syntactic rules as its 'parent' phrase. In other idioms, the relationship is more obscure. When '**buy the farm**' (transitive verb plus direct object) stands in for '**die**' (intransitive verb), the idiom *as a whole* seems to take over the subcategorisation frame of the 'parent' verb – so that it can take a past form but not, for example, passive form: **he bought the farm -> [*]the farm was bought by him**. The idiom also resists adjective insertion ***he bought the big farm**.

It should be noted that some care is needed in guessing exactly which parent verb the idiom is standing in for. Apparent differences between the behaviour of an idiom and the behaviour of its 'parent' are quite possibly evident that the 'translation' is incorrect. For example, Marantz (1997) argues that 'kick the bucket' does not (and cannot) mean 'die', because it has a different aspectual distribution – we can say "He was dying for weeks," but not "He was kicking the bucket for weeks." The probable explanation is that "kick the bucket" is not an exact synonym of the word 'die', but of a concept like 'to pass away'. Pragmatic considerations also apply. 'He bought the farm quietly, in his sleep' is admissible grammatically, but sounds odd at the pragmatic level. This is not, of course, a feature limited to idioms.

A few apparent exceptions to this analysis appear to be an accidental consequence idiom formation. In some case, verbs within idioms appear to take different past tenses from their 'normal' morphology, e.g. **the troops ringed the city**. These are not, however, a consequence of the verb's location within an idiom, but the fact that

the verb here is derived from a noun – ‘to form a ring around the city.’ Compare this with: **they rang the changes**. A specific group of idioms preserves words that are otherwise extinct or rare. As Pinker (1999) notes, such constructions can sometimes be manipulated, but the results feel odd: **we forewent the pleasure of watching his holiday slides** is awkward because we have no experience of forming the past tense of ‘forego’, and it is not entirely clear whether it should share the stem-suppletion past tense of the verb ‘to go’. Equally **neck of the woods -> necks of the woods** feels uncomfortable because the original meaning of ‘neck’ as used here has dropped out of English usage. According to Southampton University’s website this is an example of “... an old word [being] preserved in only one or two special sayings. In the case of *neck* the ancestor words in Old Breton (*cnoch*) and Old German (*hnack*) both had a sense of ‘hill’ or ‘summit’; i.e. identifying a place.” The exact relationship between ‘neck’ and ‘place’ is now obscure. These idioms have unusual features, and are not systematic evidence that idioms act as lexical units.

Idioms and Psycholinguistics

These observations raise questions about the way L1 idioms are processed. Specifically: are they processed differently to non-idiomatic phrases? Research suggests that, at each step in the process of decoding ‘normal’ sentences, a large number of words are retrieved from the lexicon according to *both* their syntactic and semantic probability within the unfolding sentence, then discarded as further evidence is accrued (Aitchison, 1996).

In the case of idioms, there is evidence that both syntactic and semantic processing is applied:

... until ... the idiom is recognized, and its figurative interpretation is made available. [I]t appears that the abandonment of literal processing is specific to semantic analysis: Syntactic processing appears to persist in a normal fashion (Peterson, Burgess, Dell, & Eberhard, n.d., p. 22).

In other words, idioms are processed word-by-word, in the same way as 'normal' sentences, until the idiomatic meaning is recognised. At that point, no further semantic processing is needed, but the syntactic structure of the sentence continues to be processed.

Idioms and Language Acquisition

In parallel with the widespread acceptance of a fairly rigid division between 'words' and 'rules', most studies of language acquisition focus on the separate acquisition of single words and fully productive syntactic rules. However, as some researchers have observed, both children acquiring their L1 and many older learners acquiring a second language actually used mixed strategies. Children's early learning involves the memorisation of rhymes, songs and a range of formulaic strings (greeting, requests, etc). While these may be *capable* of being decomposed word by word, it seems that this is not the way that they actually are used (Wray, 2002). Adult learners may also acquire an L2 in the early stages partly by learning entire formulaic chunks – a strategy reflected in the 'phrasebook' approach.

A second child L1 acquisition strategy has interesting resonances with the characteristics of phrasal idioms noted in this paper. It has been suggested that, alongside acquiring individual words, children acquire larger constructions containing 'light verbs' such as 'go', 'do', 'make' and 'give'. These structures then act as templates, into which other verbs, later acquired, can be slotted. These structures mirror some of the behaviour of phrasal idioms noted above. For example, "when we hear the verb *rumble* in the same construction that we have learned for *go*, as in 'the truck rumbles down the street', we give it a parallel interpretation...[e]ven though no word in this sentence by itself implies motion." (Burling, 2002, p. 307).

Idioms and Pragmatics

Perhaps the least-considered issue in the linguistic literature is the *meaning* of idioms. This is ironic; idioms are, after all, pre-eminently

a tool of everyday life and everyday speech. Idioms may be expressions “... whose meaning can not be taken as a combination of the meanings of [their] component parts” but in many cases the meaning – or an approximation of it – *can* be gathered by applying experience to the phrase as a whole. Compare:

when the cat's away, the mice will play (English)
wenn die Katze aus dem Haus ist, tanzen die Mäuse auf dem Tisch (German)
'when the cat is out of the house, the mice dance on the table'
แมวไม่มีอยู่ หนูร่าเริง (Thai)
'(when the) cat is not there, mice make merry'

The fact that the same idiom is successfully used to convey the same meaning in three cultures surely points to a factor that linguists tend to undervalue: shared experience. Clearly, none of these phrases is really about cats, mice or their recreational activities. Yet their *meaning* is hardly obscure. It can be grasped by anyone who has a passing familiarity with the relationship between cats and mice, and with the behaviour of pupils or employees.

Idioms, after all, must have a certain social persuasiveness, or they would not find a place in the language. Language is, by definition, a social activity and meaning can often be distilled by guessing what other social actors might wish to convey, rather than by laboriously chaining together the meanings of each individual word in a phrase:

I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer (New York Times, June 2003)
She's one voucher short of a pop-up toaster (UK popular speech)
He's no bargain in the brains department (Joseph Heller, 'God Knows')

Indeed, much of the allure of idioms is their power to sum up – either succinctly, or in a colourful way, or both – familiar experiences that would otherwise require a tediously long-winded explanation (**they kicked him upstairs; it's a rip-off**). Such idioms may be ‘decomposable’, in the sense that their individual components contribute to their figurative meaning (Abel, 2003).

Conclusions

Idioms are interesting beasts; they seem to exhibit the syntactic behaviour of phrase-level grammar, while their idiosyncratic meanings are lexically stored (or, to use a different terminology, held in a mental ‘encyclopedia’). This duality leads Embick and Marantz (2000, p. 2) to observe that:

allowing stored information to be information about complex structures undermines ... [the] simple dichotomy between what is stored and what is derived via a rule.

The same duality also challenges the view that teaching idioms to L2 English students is a lexical cul-de-sac. Idioms are widespread in language and frequently encountered in everyday speech. It is not surprising, then, that many EFL/ESL books include sections on idioms. Yet the treatment they receive is often strangely dismissive. Harmer (1992, p. 26), for example, says of ‘fixed phrases’: “It may be important to learn them, but that is all you learn!” Because they are “... single items – you cannot use them to generate more language as you can with grammatical structure.” On the contrary, idioms offer particularly rich teaching opportunities. As ‘lexical items’, their very frequency in natural language demands that they be tackled in L2 teaching. They are used extensively in modern business textbooks and ‘serious’ newspapers and magazines, and will be frequently encountered by students who are interested in English for special purposes (business learners), for everyday life (newspaper readers) or for ‘cultural’ aspects of the target language community.

At the same time, their syntactic behaviour allows them to be used for a range of grammatical purposes that simple ‘vocabulary’ teaching cannot offer. In this context, the ‘colourful’ nature of idioms makes them especially attractive. By adding interest and fun to the classroom, they may bring motivation to the unmotivated, while for more advanced learners idiomatic expressions may offer a rewarding way of achieving relatively quick further progress: instant fluency.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, most EFL/ESL textbooks present idioms as mere ‘chunks of rote-memorised stuff’. I have argued

that they are much more than that, that the charges of lexicalism brought against them are largely false, and that their confinement to the 'prison of the lexicon' is a miscarriage of justice. A retrial might be in order.

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