

Research on Range and Forms of English Idioms from the Perspective of Understanding and Application

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Abstract: The understanding and application of idioms is not an easy task. As an indispensable part of language, idioms best mirror the national characteristics embodied in a language and are thus always rich in cultural connotation and national flavor, which are necessary for learners to know while learning. Since idiom possesses several meanings which might cause some confusion to people, their understanding is quite hard in most cases. English and Chinese are abundant in idioms. Idioms are the most difficult part to render in both languages. It is worth discussing on better understanding their meanings by making clear the definition of idioms and the classification of the range and forms of English idioms, so as to better understand and convey the meaning of English idioms in such a way that it will impose the same effect on the target reader as the original does upon the original reader. In this paper, range and forms of English idioms will be introduced, hoping to cast some enlightenment on further research in this field.

1. Introduction

Idioms, or conventionalized multiword expressions, often but not always non-literal, are hardly marginal in English, though they have been relatively neglected in lexical studies of the language [1]. In some senses, idioms are the reflection of the environment, life, historical culture, etc. of the native speakers and are closely associated with their innermost spirit and feelings.

English idioms, in a broad sense, include idiomatic phrases, proverbial sayings and a number of slang expressions, whereas Chinese idioms fall into such broad categories as set phrases, common sayings, proverbs, a two-part allegorical saying and what is termed as vulgar expressions. Since it is only a rough classification, there must be some overlaps among them.

2. Definition of Idioms

It is quite difficult to give a clear-cut definition to the word “idiom”, for it possesses several meanings which might get us completely at sea.

Charles F. Hockett is the only modern theoretician to have dealt in writing extensively and seriously with the idiom. He uses the term IDIOM as a cover term for certain lexicographic and syntactic phenomena which share the fact that the meaning is not predictable from the composition [2].

In the chapter on Words in A course in modern linguistics (Hockett, 1958), Hockett gives the following formal definition of the idiom:

Let us momentarily use the term Y for any grammatical form the meaning of which is not deducible from its structure. Any Y, in an occurrence in which it is not a constituent of a larger Y, is an idiom. A vast number of composite forms in any language are idioms. If we are to be consistent in our use of the definition, we are forced also to grant every morpheme idiomatic status, save when it is occurring as a constituent of a larger idiom, since a morpheme has no structure from which its meaning could be deduced [3].

Hockett's definition and expanded treatment of the term idiom is such that it includes monomorphemic lexemes, lexemes consisting of several words (phrasal compounds, phrasal verbs, etc.), proverbial phrases, quotations, literary allusions, private codes, unfinished allusions. Certain monomorphemic lexemes (substitutes and numerals) are suggested to be, additionally, different idioms in different occurrences due to a shifting of denotata. From a stratification point of view all of this is quite arbitrary and unnecessary. It seems that it would be far more meaningful from the point of view of an economical structural presentation of the language to use the term idiom only for units realized by at least two morphemes. Also it appears necessary to separate the idioms belonging to the lexology from those belonging to the serology^[2].

It can be concluded that an idiom is an expression whose meaning is not compositional and does not follow from the meaning of the individual words it is made up of. As Webster's New World Dictionary of the American English (1988) defines "idiom": 1) the language proper or peculiar to a people or to a district, community or class; the syntactical, grammatical or structural form peculiar to a language; 2) an expression established in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in grammatical construction or in having a meaning that cannot be derived as a whole from the conjoined meanings of its elements; 3) style or form of artistic expression (as in painting, writing, composing) that is characteristic especially of an individual, a period or movement, or a medium or instrument^[4].

3. Range and Forms of English Idioms

3.1 Idiomatic Phrases

English is abundant in idiomatic phrases. "Idiomatic phrases can be further classified into the following three units according to the degree of closeness within the components of an idiomatic phrase: (1) phraseological collocations; (2) phraseological unities; (3) phraseological fusion."^[5]

3.1.1 Phraseological Collocations

Phraseological collocations are "free syntactical groups, in which variability of member words is strictly limited"^[6].

The meaning of the phraseological collocation is evident, for the components retain their full semantic independence. For instance: "to bear a grudge" may be changed into "to bear malice", but not into "to bear a fancy or liking". We can say "take a liking (fancy)" but not "take hatred (disgust)". Similar idioms are "as busy as a bee", "to render assistance", "to do harm" and "to hear with half an ear", in which the structure is loose, but the meaning is literal^[7].

3.1.2 Phraseological Unities

Phraseological unities are comparatively tight in internal structure. "However the meaning of the whole unit is not the sum of the meaning of its components, but is based upon them"^[6].

It may be perceived through the metaphoric meaning of the whole phraseological unit. But no element can be changed in such units without destroying the sense as a whole. Take "show one's colors" as an example, the metaphoric meaning of the whole unit, readily suggests "to show what one is really like" or "to make known what one thinks or plans to do". And "all at sea" has the meaning of "unable to understand; in a state of ignorance or bewilderment about circumstances, a situation, etc." "The metaphor is that of a boat tossed about, out of control, adrift, with its occupant or occupants not knowing where they are."^[8]

No element in these phrases can be varied and the meanings are not the sum of the meaning of its components. Similar idioms are, "see red", "come true", "jump to conclusion", "lose one's head", "lay heads together" and "sweep off one's feet", etc. Phraseological unities are as a rule marked by a high degree of stability of the lexical components.

3.1.3 Phraseological Fusions

Phraseological fusions are the most fixed in structure among the three kinds of idiomatic phrases under discussion. Their total meaning can never be derived from the conjoined meanings of their elements.

Take the expression “go Dutch (with someone)” as an example. Instead of going to the Netherlands (Holland), it has the meaning of “to go out for fun together but have each person pay for himself; to share expenses”. A speaker knowing the meaning of “go” and “Dutch” will still not be able to predict that this expression can be used with the meaning of “to share expenses”. And “on the house”, for example, has nothing to do with house. In contrast to its literal counterpart meaning “on the roof of the house”, a non-literal meaning is imposed on the idioms as a whole: “being paid for by the people in charge, as by the owner of a public house, by a firm, etc.”^[7].

Here are some more examples of effective phraseological fusion whose structure cannot be changed and whose meaning can never be derived from the conjoined meanings of their elements: “a rough diamond” means “person who is good-natured but lacking polished manners, education, etc.” or “a person or thing of fine quality but lacking polish”, its Chinese counterpart is “hún jīn pú yù”. “(To make) a mountain out of a molehill” means “(to make) a trivial matter seem important” and its Chinese counterpart can be “xiǎo tí dà zuò”. And by saying “rain cats and dogs”, it means “rain heavily”, its Chinese counterpart is “qīng pén dà yǔ”, “piáo pō dà yǔ”.^[7].

3.2 Proverbs

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs (1992) defines proverbs as “short, pithy saying in general use.”^[9]. Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1983) defines proverbs as “a brief popular epigram or maxim.”^[10]. Obviously, in general, the proverb is the wisdom of mankind, the wisdom of many and the wit of one. It is a traditional saying that sums up a situation, passes judgment on a past matter, or recommends a course of action for the future^[6].

The term “proverb” is used also to cover “maxims”. “Maxim” generally applies to a rule for conduct, “proverb” to what, universally, happens or is true. Some proverbs, just like idiomatic phrases, are open statements, whose meaning is straight-forward. But most proverbs are metaphorical. Here are some proverbs stating a fact that may be universally acknowledged: “Actions speak louder than words”, “The first step is always the hardest”, “An idle youth, a needy age”, “Constant dripping wears away the stone”.

Many proverbs, like certain folktales and folk songs, are truly international. The English proverb “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” has parallels in most European countries, and its Chinese counterpart is “shuāng niǎo zài lín bù rú yī niǎo zài shǒu”. Besides, many proverbs may be found to support almost any view. They may express contradictory opinions. “Look before you leap” urges caution, but “He who hesitates is lost” urges immediate action. And “Well begun is half done” lay emphasis on the start, whereas “The end crowns all” and “All’s well that ends well” on the finish^[6].

As to the structure, proverbs consist of at least one topic and one comment about that topic. They can have as few as two words: “Time flies”, “Money talks”, “Tastes differ” and “Lifeless, faultless”. Many proverbs fall into one of several traditional patterns. They may present an alternative: “Sink or swim”, “Do or die”, “Give me liberty or give me death”. Or an equation: “Seeing is believing”, “Live and learn”, “Enough is enough” and “Nothing for nothing”. Proverbs often make use of contrast: “A good beginning makes a good ending”, “One man’s meat is another man’s poison”. Sometimes the contrast is emphasized by parallel structure: “Out of sight, out of mind”, “Least said, sooner mended”, “Penny wise, pound foolish”, “Waste not, want not”, “More haste, less speed”, “Easy come, easy go”, and “Where there’s a will there’s a way”, etc.^[6].

3.3 Slang

Slang, an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases, is an indispensable component of English language. The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary (1978) defines slang as “language in common colloquial use but considered to be outside standard educated speech and consisting either of new words or phrases or of current words used in new sense.” The definition do throw some light on the essence of slang, but just like the proverbial blind men describing an elephant, all correctly, none sufficiently, they are inclined to stress one aspect or another of slang.

A more comprehensive and satisfying definition is read in Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language (Unabridged) (2006): “1. Originally, the specialized vocabulary and idioms of the criminals, tramps, etc., the purpose of which was to disguise from outsiders the meaning of what was said; now usually called cant. 2. The specialized vocabulary and idioms of those in the same work, way of life, etc. now usually called shoptalk, argot, jargon. 3. Colloquial language that is outside of conventional or standard usage and consists of both coined words (blurb, whoopee) and those with new or extended meanings (rubberneck, sap); slang develops from the attempt to find fresh and vigorous, colorful, pungent, or humorous expression, and generally either passes into disuse or comes to have a more formal status.”^[11].

This is a more objective and comprehensive definition so far because it not only denotes the overall evolution of slang’s connotation in different stages, but points out the user, characteristics, formation, and even the motive of slang.

Slang expressions are widely used in informal speech and writing, but some say they are not acceptable in formal contexts. As a matter of fact, there is a real place for slang in both the literary language and the unstudied speech. William Shakespeare, the well-known great poet and dramatist in English literature, he himself, however, employed many words and expressions which could be considered as dreadfully vulgar as schoolboy slang. Shakespeare has never been forgotten and has never lost his appeal to the audiences or to the ambitious actors through all the changes of fashion and taste in the three hundred years and more. And more Shakespearean dramas have held the stage continuously to the present time than the works of all other Elizabethan dramatists put together.

Slang draws numerous phrases from the shop talk of every profession, trade, sport, school and social group, but it gives them a currency outside the limits of these occupations. For instance: “drop the ball” which means “breach of duty”, in Chinese it is “shī zhī”. “Put one’s nose to the grindstone” means “be intent on one’s work”, it can be translated literally into “bí zi chòng zhē mó dāo shí” in Chinese, while the implied meaning is “zhuān xīn gōng zuò”. Both slang expressions in the above are from different occupations^[7].

Slang is popular because it is often humorous, witty and sometimes picturesque. And being full of the most pungent satire, it is always to the point. Owing to its novelty slang has been described as the ordinary man’s poetry, and it is true that the imagery involved in slang is not so very different from that in poetry. Metaphor is the most characteristic type of creation that slang admits.

In slang “a screw loose” means “to be slightly mad”. “Death” may be described as “kicking the bucket”, “hopping over the perch” or “turning up one’s toes”. “Cancer stick” means “a cigarette”. “Failure” is referred to as “not getting to first base”, “hitting a foul ball”, “getting nailed” or “running into a stone wall”. And “to be discharged from a job” is “to be sacked, bounced, fired or axed” etc.^[6]. Most slang expressions are popular due to their vivid images and rich association, however some of them have a very short life. They become rapidly outdated after meeting a momentary need or expressing a temporary opinion.

In brief, slang expressions in English mostly come from common people, reflecting common people’s life. And a word which originates as slang is usually superior in expressiveness to its regular synonyms. Historically, slang has been one of the experiment stations in which verbal candidates are tried out; it has been one stage in the contest for the survival of the fittest. A certain number of slang expressions are simply serving their apprenticeship and will become the active strength of even the more formal language although many of them now in vogue are likely to fall out of use in the next two or three decades. In fact, slang is the reservoir from which the established language has drawn many turns of expression^[12].

4. Conclusion

Idiom is a form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc, peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one. The definitions of idiom and above discussions on the range and forms of English idioms may lead us to a much better understanding of idiom, which, is also said to be an expression whose meaning is not compositional and does not follow from the meaning of the individual words it is made up of. Although idioms are the most difficult part to render in languages due to its rich cultural connotations, it is worth discussing on better understanding the definition of idioms and the classification of the range and forms of English idioms, so as to better convey the meaning of English idioms in such a way that it will impose the same effect on the target reader as the original does upon the original reader.

This paper is only a preliminary research on the range and forms of English idioms from the perspective of the understanding and application. It is believed that further discussion and more explorations in this field from different perspectives are necessary and worthy.

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