

# Research on Characteristics of English Idioms with Cross-cultural Communication Considerations

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**Abstract:** Idioms play an important role in writing, speech and even in our oral communication, but along with the importance and usefulness of idioms are the difficulties in our understanding. A good knowledge of their characteristics may help us get informed of their exact meaning and get familiar with their correct application on different occasions. It is worth discussing the characteristics of English idioms. It is believed that it will be helpful to enable people both to have a more exact understanding of English idioms and to use them correctly on different occasions, and more important is that it is also of great significance in language teaching and cultural inheritance. A preliminary research on characteristics of English idioms with cross-cultural communication considerations will be introduced in this paper, hoping to cast some enlightenment on further research in this field.

## 1. Introduction

If idioms are a relatively neglected area in lexical studies, it can also be said that the lexis itself has been relatively neglected in language studies. Such neglect could be ascribed to the vocabulary being viewed as the non-generative component, the rules of sentence construction being the generative and, consequently, the creative component <sup>[1]</sup>.

The commonest view of the vocabulary is that it is an inventory of words and it is as an inventory of words that it is displayed in that institutionalized repository of the word stock, the dictionary. Though this view of the vocabulary obscures the systematic, interdependent nature of words in use and the way language-users perceive these interdependent relationships as reflecting conceptual associative organization, it is not entirely unjustified <sup>[2]</sup>. Words and multiword expressions on the one hand, and sentences on the other, are interdependent yet two different phenomena. There are differences between producing and responding to new sentences and to new words <sup>[4]</sup>.

Coulmas <sup>[5]</sup>; Pawley and Syder <sup>[6]</sup>; Pawley <sup>[7]</sup>; and Tannen <sup>[8]</sup> have also highlighted the abundance of familiar conventionalized word combinations in discourse. These familiar combinations, which include idioms and habitual collocations, can be described as realizations of what Sinclair <sup>[9]</sup> calls the 'idiom principle', although such realizations vary from strong in the case of idioms to weak in collocations. Implicit in such a gradation is the notion of a scale of idiomaticity, such as various types of collocations, are only marginally idiomatic <sup>[2]</sup>.

The change and development of languages is universal and absolute, while the stability of languages is relative. Idioms, as a special part of a language, both in Chinese and English, share some common characteristic features which we call idiomaticity in terms of content and form <sup>[3]</sup>.

## 2. Idioms and Idiomaticity

While closely related, idioms and idiomaticity are not identical. The basis of both is the habitual and, therefore, predictable co-occurrence of specific words, but with idioms signifying a narrower range of word combinations than idiomaticity. Idioms, whose components cannot be varied or

varied only within definable limits, are indivisible units. No other words can be substituted for those comprising, for instance, smell a rat or seize / grasp the nettle, which take either of these two verbs but no others: thus grab is unacceptable. Nor are the words of an idiom usually recombinable <sup>[2]</sup>.

All idioms show idiomaticity. However, all word combinations showing idiomaticity. Not only in idioms and conventional ad hoc collocations but also in conventional lexicogrammatical sequencing most apparent in longer text fragments, idiomaticity is exemplified. All idioms are not grammatically regular. “While habitual co-occurrence produces idiomatic expressions, both canonical and non-canonical, only those expressions which become conventionally fixed in a specific order and lexical form, or have only a restricted set of variants, acquire the status of idioms and are recorded in idiom dictionaries as bread and butter and footloose and fancy free. Showing a relatively high degree of variability, especially in the matter of lexical replacement such as catch a bus, catch a train, etc, though they exemplify idiomaticity by virtue of habitual co-occurrence, combinations are not regarded as idioms <sup>[2]</sup>.

The existence of idioms, or conventionalized multiword expressions, showing invariance or only restricted variation and habitual collocations, restricted or unrestricted in their variability, calls for a scale of idiomaticity.

Idiomaticity, the essential differences between idioms and other words, consists of two aspects: the semantic feature of idioms, and the structural feature. As to its semantic unity, since idioms are concise and comprehensive, to understand idioms appropriately, we have to understand them as a whole. Idioms are fixed in their structure and allow no arbitrary alteration in their components, thus another feature is structural stability <sup>[3]</sup>. The semantic and structural characteristics of English idioms will be discussed in more detail at below.

### **3. Characteristics of English Idioms**

#### **3.1 Semantic Unity**

Idioms are either sentences or phrases, both in Chinese and English, consisting of more than one word.

##### **3.1.1 Each Idiom is Considered as a Semantic Unit**

Each idiom is considered as a semantic unit. Semantic unity refers to the fact that an idiom is semantically integrated as a whole. Although the various words which make up of the idiom have individual literal meaning, they lost their individual identity in idioms. For instance, “take in” means “deceive or fool sb.” in which “take” does not mean “carry or get hold of sth” <sup>[3]</sup>.

Obviously, the meaning of a particular idiom is not simply the combination of the meanings of each word contained in it. On the contrary, an idiom is usually put on new meaning when considered as a semantic unit. Each word in English idioms has its own specific meaning. But we can hardly understand an idiom only from individual meaning of each component word.

For example, “to rain cats and dogs” does not really mean “cats and dogs fall from the sky”, but means “to rain heavily” <sup>[10]</sup> and “qīng pēn dà yǔ” or “piáo pō dà yǔ” in Chinese, which becomes a metaphor for a heavy downpour of rain <sup>[3]</sup>.

And “to burn one’s boats” does not really mean “to put one’s boats in fire and burn them”, but means “to cut off all means of retreat or to fight it out at all costs or to do something that makes it impossible to retreat, to change one’s plans” or “to take a step that will make impossible retreat from a course, policy, etc.”, its Chinese equivalence is “pò fǔ chéng zhōu”, the allusion is to the action by military leaders of burning the boats in which an army had crossed a river so that the soldiers know they must conquer or die, as retreat was impossible <sup>[10]</sup>.

Let’s take another example, “I am under the weather”. In this sentence, “under the weather” refers to “unwell or depressed, unhappy”. The literal meaning would be that one was experiencing

bad weather. The figurative meaning is that one's health or spirits are affected by adverse conditions<sup>[10]</sup>. It doesn't have the meaning of "below the weather".

More examples are as follows: "break the bank" means "win all the money that is being risked at a game of chance, esp. in a casino" that is "quán shèng; huò de suǒ dǔ zhī quán shù" in Chinese; "at the end of the rainbow" has the meaning of "at the place where all one's hopes are fulfilled", the Chinese meaning is "zài shí xiàn mèng xǐng de dì fāng"<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 3.1.2 Some Idioms Both Have Literal Meaning and Idiomatic Meaning

Some idioms both have literal meaning and idiomatic meaning.

Take "a rainy day" as an example. The literal meaning of "a rainy day" is "of a day in which much rain falls", while its idiomatic meaning is "for a time when money may be needed" and its Chinese equivalence is "wèi yǔ chóu móu, yǐ bèi bù shí zhī xū". The literal meaning of "miss the boat" is "do not catch the boat" and its idiomatic meaning is "be too slow to take an opportunity; fail through slowness; do the wrong thing and lose the chance", it equivalents to "zuò shī liáng jī" in Chinese<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 3.1.3 Some Logical Problems in Some Idioms

There are some logical problems in some idioms. For instance, "eat one's head off" implies "eat too much", while it seems its literal meaning is "to eat off one's head". The implied meaning of "think on one's feet" is "be quick in thinking", and "the world and his wife" means "large numbers of people". All have some logical problems if translate these idioms literally.

Another feature concerning semantic is its figurative usage which make idioms very vivid. "As blind as a bat" is more vivid than "very blind", and the figurative meaning of "fall off one's chair" is "to be startled to some extent" which is more expressive than "very surprised".

"These may offer difficulties of interpretation to language learners, native and non-native, since large numbers of idioms are non-literal; if unfamiliar, they would be semantically opaque and, if so, incongruous in terms of the co-text even to competent language-users as no one knows all the words of a language."<sup>[2]</sup>

The composite nature of idioms, together with their total or partial fixity, affects their semantics, whether this is a matter of signification or connotation, in that the semantic unity of idioms is strongly linked to these two lexicogrammatical features<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 3.2 Structural Stability

Being established by usage, an idiom generally cannot be altered. That is, no component word can be substituted by any other synonymous word or be omitted arbitrarily in the idiom and the arrangement of the words can rarely be modified. The idiom will commonly be destroyed by any attempted change in the collocation or wording and perhaps render the expression meaningless.

### 3.2.1 Component Words cannot be Added or Omitted at Will

We cannot add or omit component words at will. There was a time when the component words of some idioms may be replaced in the course of language development. Hard and fast as they seem to be, idioms may have variants of their own. But during a specific period, we have to abide by the rules that idioms, once formed and accepted, their component words cannot be altered or added or omitted arbitrarily. For example, in English, there is an idiom like "live from hand to mouth", meaning "satisfying only one's present basic needs". We cannot transform it into "live from the hand to the mouth" by adding two articles "the" to it.

In "a lick and a promise" and in "the cut and the lip", neither "a" nor "the" can be omitted at will. The idiom "lose heart" means "to feel discouraged because of failure, to lose hope of success" which is "huī xīn, shī wàng" in Chinese, while "lose one's heart to" has the meaning of "fall in love", though they use the same words "lose" and "heart", the meaning is completely different. Let's look at another example, "to leave in the air" means something being unsolved. The article "the" in this idiom cannot be omitted, for "leave in air" is not an idiom at all and meaningless<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Synonymous Words cannot be used to Replace Idioms Arbitrarily

We cannot use synonymous words to replace idioms arbitrarily. For example, in “a stitch in time saves nine” the article “a” cannot be replaced by its synonymous “one”. “To be at liberty” has the meaning of “free to go somewhere or do something”, “not shut in or stopped”<sup>[10]</sup>, it is “rèn yì, bù shòu jū shù” in Chinese, which cannot be changed into “to be at freedom”, though “freedom” has the same meaning with “liberty”<sup>[3]</sup>.

“To have an axe to grind” means “to have private interests to serve”, “to have sth. to gain for oneself” or “to have a selfish reason”, whose Chinese equivalence is “bié yǒu yòng xīn, lìng yǒu qǐ tú, huái yǒu sī xīn”. It cannot be replaced by “to have a chopper to grind” or “to have a hatchet to grind”. In the same way, “smell a rat” cannot be changed into “smell a mouse”. “See red”, which means “be excitedly and violently angry”, cannot be “see scarlet”<sup>[3]</sup> And “a dead letter”, which means “law or rule not enforced”, cannot be changed into “a dead mail”.

“A nice kettle of fish”, which is always used with an ironic epithet, especially ‘pretty’, to mean “a plight, a disagreeable or awkward state of things”, is not to be transformed into “a nice jug of fish”. And “the apple of discord”, which means “cause of contention”, cannot be replaced by “the apple of disagreement”<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 3.2.3 Form and Word Order of Idioms cannot be Changed

We cannot change the form and word order of idioms. In English idioms, the singular and plural forms of nouns and verbs are fixed and unchangeable. So is the word order. For example, the idiom “aches and pains” cannot be changed into “ache and pain” due to the unchangeable forms of nouns in idioms. And “on the board” means “to discuss at meetings”, while “on the boards” means “to be an actor or actress on stage”.

Idioms similar in form are totally different, with or without the plural form of a word. Take another example, in “like cures like”, whose Chinese meaning is “yǐ dú gōng dú”, the verb “cure” appear in the third person singular form. We cannot change it into “like cure like”, while the verb “cut” in the idiom “diamond cut diamond” remains in the original form which means “qí féng duì shǒu” in Chinese.

The English idiom “through thick-and-thin” refers to “in spite of all the difficulties” that is “zhōng zhēn bù yú, tóng gān gòng kǔ” in Chinese. The word order of it is not to be changed from “through thick-and-thin” into “through thin-and-thick”; and the idiom: “at sixes and sevens” cannot be changed into “at sevens and sixes” and “twos and threes” cannot be “threes and twos”, etc. And the meaning of “before long” is different from “long before” since the word order has changed<sup>[3]</sup>.

## 4. Conclusion

Among basic characteristic features, the feature of fixity or stability of idioms, which are abundant in fixed phrases, is the most important characteristic feature. People of same community are not allowed to break the common rules in using idioms, nor are they entitled to change the forms arbitrarily since idioms are formed and accepted historically and conventionally. In brief, the characteristic features are single unit, institutionalization and irreplaceability.

It is well acknowledged that English idioms use a terse, vivid and figurative language to generalize various experiences and laws in the struggle of life, and to express the thought and wisdom of the common people. Being closely linked with people’s thought, idioms reflect in a concrete way their will, feeling and morality, thus providing people from time to time with inspiration and didactical information. That is why idioms have become so widespread and will continue to be handed down from generations to generations. Many idioms as mentioned in this paper do not follow any standard rules, and sometimes are wrong in logic. They seem arbitrary and no reason can be given as to how or why a particular idiomatic phrase has assumed its present form. They are fixed in their structure and allow no arbitrary alteration in their components, as most

idioms have been refined through long usage in practice and been accepted by the common people, they possess an unusual precision and stability.

Therefore, we cannot alter idioms at will. Though they are multiword expressions, the distinctive feature of idioms is that they are also lexicalized: “though in varying degrees, of phrases, semi-clauses, and clauses, which indeed the majority are, they have the semantic unity of single words but the grammatical flexibility, Hence, they need to be described by means of the descriptive procedures common to both the vocabulary and the grammar”<sup>[2]</sup>.

Thus, better known of their characteristics may help us a lot to better understand their exact meaning and be more familiar with their appropriate use on different occasions. This paper is just a preliminary research on characteristic features of English idioms. Further research and more explorations in this field with more cross-cultural communication considerations are believed to be necessary and worthy.

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