

SOME HINTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING IDIOMATICITY¹

STANISLAV KAVKA

University of Ostrava

1. Place of idiomaticity

Everybody interested in linguistics must have noticed how many and varied types of studies have been pursued lately. It suffices to notice the diversity of topics that are presented at bigger conferences, and this is not only due to those computerising trends in the respective fields of interest. Sometimes, we must admit, new names are only given to formerly examined phenomena, but even those who may not be aware of doing what in fact has been done already do always come in with something really new and therefore they deserve to be listened to. What I feel we should be discontent with, however, is the fact that we seem to lack, as it were, some discipline which may encompass and make full use of the results so far achieved. In other words, we have been bombarded with countless pieces of information, their number only being increased with modern electronic devices, and we seem to be behind with making useful generalisations and practical outcomes. Linguists, specialised in one or the other field of interest, tend to join in work on partial issues, analysing them to every detail possible, and they think but little of working out a global theory, helpful for linguistics itself and comprehensible enough for appropriate practical application. And yet there is a chance to find a way out! In the preface to her 1996 book *Idiomaticity in the basic writing of American English* Sonomura tries to answer the question of what to do about the many foregoing types of studies, such as cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, diachronic, frequency counts, etc., and she offers the following answer: "Perhaps the chances would be improved if applied linguistics incorpo-

¹ The present article is an abridged version of the author's course of lectures delivered at the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in autumn 1999.

rated all research in language use." In this sense applied linguistics is believed to have a higher status than being limited to "English as a second language". Moreover, Sonomura goes on to claim for idiomaticity to form a natural part of applied linguistics.

2. What is meant by "idiomaticity"?

2.1. Etymological explanations

Learners will run into difficulties if they try to look for the entry 'idiomaticity' in a dictionary. There is no word like this in any Anglo-American dictionaries, and it is also absent in the 1937 and 1989 Czech academic dictionaries. Yet the recursive morpheme *-ity* applied to adjectival bases, like *productivity*, *posterity*, *security*, etc., makes it possible for the word *idiomaticity* to be explained semantically as a quality derived from an attribution 'constituting (an) idiom(s)' or 'containing (an) idiom(s)'. The base word *idiom* proper, however, has been used in English since the late 1500s, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, explaining its meaning out of quite a few authorities (among them J. Donne and J. Dryden), translates it directly from the Greek ἰδιότης, namely, 'own, private, peculiar'. Here are some of the quotations:

- (1) 'the form of speech peculiar or proper to a people or country';
- (2) 'the variety of a language which is peculiar to a limited district or class of people';
- (3) 'the manner of expression which is natural or peculiar to it';
- (4) 'the specific character, property or genius of any language'; etc.

The first three definitions, "etymological", as it were, seem to be synonymous with the word *dialect*. And, indeed, recent editions of the *OED* and *Webster*, too, recall this meaning:

- (5) 'the language or dialect of a people, region, class, etc.'

The fourth definition, however, points to one more meaning: this characteristic has been extended to the "language" of art or music and to the "language" of respective artists (e.g., *the idiom of Shakespeare*). In this sense, also noted in modern dictionaries, the meaning of *idiom* is synonymous with that of *style*, understood as *l'homme même*.

2.2. Views on idioms and idiomaticity

The other examples quoted in the *OED* suggest that idioms, understood more or less as "dialects", are characteristic of colloquial styles of the language rather than of the cultivated and academically approved written styles. It is good to note that such colloquialisms were very often criticised; for example, in the

Preface to his great *Dictionary* (1755) Dr. Samuel Johnson maintains that his is the dictionary "by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated, by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened ..." He regrets, too, that "colloquial licentiousness", by which he means idiomatic innovations brought about by illiterate writers, "sully the grammatical purity". The endeavour at fixation and purity of English was so strong that idioms viewed as something peculiar and dialectal were simply rejected. Relatively recently, pre-structuralists, and descriptive grammarians generally, mentioned "idioms" in their essays, but they seemed to look upon them with distrust, almost as did Johnson, taking them as phrases which transgressed either the laws of grammar or the laws of logic. Briefly, idioms were avoided in the past because they did not fit the framework of structuralism; namely, the structuralists' effort was to discover general patterns and rules for linguistic structures, and idioms as something exceptional could not comply with them. Idioms often represent complexes, which, on the one hand, work as single forms, further indivisible, and, on the other hand, they appear as analysable syntactic structures (sometimes deviant, though). Moreover, these complexes are heterogeneous, lexically and syntactically, and represent a continuum of various dimensions. This, too, must be a serious obstacle to closer inspection. As early as Sweet and many others after him pointed to the semantic non-compositionality of idioms, taking them as semantic entities. On the other hand, since Bloomfield (1933) and his followers refused semantic studies, idioms, too, were disregarded. It may be worth noticing that even the linguists who wrote on semantics, e.g., Ullman, Ziff, Lyons, and others, paid almost no attention to idioms. Idioms simply did not fit any approach of modern linguistics. Traditionally, to know a language has meant to have a supply of morphemes in memory, and rules by means of which the morphemes are combined into higher units. And again, idioms do not comply with this assumption; they are too irregular to fit grammatical constructions. No wonder that Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor entitled their 1988 study "Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions: The case of 'let alone'".

While a new wave in studies of idioms can be seen in the 1950s and then in the 1970s, being a domain of interest of individuals rather than of teams or schools, idiomaticity was closely examined much earlier by Russian linguists, who were concerned deeply with lexicology. They even insisted that "idiomatics" become a linguistic discipline, alongside phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.

Of course, there were also linguists who took everything in the natural language as idiomatic, and therefore a "science" of idioms was in their opinion something like epistemology. And quite recently, also psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics have added considerably to research in idiomaticity, namely,

through various experiments that give evidence for the special status of this discipline.

3. Idiomaticity in a broader sense of the term

In our opinion, idiomaticity will encompass not only idioms proper but also other expressions which may violate the expected rules of grammar and/or logic. Moreover, idiomaticity in its broader sense is what makes the expressions in a language sound appropriate and natural to the ear of native speakers. Viewed like that, idiomaticity is believed to travel, as it were, through and across all the levels of language analysis, from phonetics/phonology to pragmatics. Normally, the study of idiomaticity deals with multiword complexes that carry unitary meanings, which, of course, need not be only idioms proper.² Nevertheless, let us accept the idea that idiomaticity in its broader sense has its right of existence, at least in foreign language teaching. Learners of English will realise soon that it is not enough to be taught and learn the lexicon of single words and the grammar for combining the words; they will soon realise that whatever they say and write in English must have a peculiar quality which renders the expression natural. We can also argue that idiomaticity is a function of familiarity and frequency of usage, which will be discussed later in this article.³

3.1. Being correct and/or idiomatic?

We should note that what is considered grammatical need not be idiomatic, and what is idiomatic may sometimes be ungrammatical. Let us realise the point by discussing a few simple examples:

- (1) *Since he's got itchy fingers, he always carries the day, he never receives the check, nor is he thrown from the saddle.*
- (2) *We broke down on the motorway.*
- (3) **Most of them was allocated a new flats.*
- (4) *We're taking a plane to Paris tomorrow.*
- (5) *Oroonoko, a negro prince ...,loved Imoinda, a general's daughter. They sought her for the king's harem, and in the end the king sold her into slavery when he discovered her love ...*
- (6) *Dear Sir, I'm writing to inquire if it'd be possible for you to attend our get-together. I'd come to meet you at the airport and give you a lift ...*
- (7) **He could not even climb a horse.*

² This practice is followed in this article, too; see §4.

³ See §5.

- (8) **He is known as making compliments to every woman. *All conflicts have been finished.*
**He decided to found a family.*
- (9) a. *My daughter is writing a letter. ([-t-] : [-d-])*
b. *We must take a lift to get to your apartment. (*)*

Native speakers and fluent speakers of English as a second language will see immediately that there is something wrong with most of the examples. Of course, those under (1) and (2) are correct, whereas (3) will be recognised as faulty even by beginners. Learners of English must be fairly advanced in order to understand the meaning of examples (1) and (2), but to master these is probably less difficult than to see the inappropriateness of examples (7) and (8). Here faulty synonymy and a 'hypothesis of transferability', respectively, play their negative roles. And again, a high level of advancement in mastering the language is expected for the learners to judge examples (4), (5), and (6). The question reads: What is wrong with the sentences under (3) through (9)? We claim that they are not "idiomatic". However, it must be borne in mind that to be "non-idiomatic" need not mean altogether the same as to be "incorrect"; or, more precisely, there is no direct equivalency between the sememes 'idiomatic' and 'correct'. Moreover, the concept of 'being idiomatic' should be understood as relative rather than absolute: we can say, and we do so sometimes, as in examples (4) or (5) above, "Look, your version is not altogether wrong, but saying 'We're flying to Paris tomorrow' is more idiomatic". Similarly, sentences (6) and (9b) are correct yet not idiomatic, and the same can be said about examples (7) and (8). On the other hand, phrases such as

- (10) *it's me; as it were; by and large, etc.*

are incorrect, and yet they are idiomatic! An explanation may be the following: when using the word *correct/correctness*, what we usually have in mind, though subconsciously, is grammatical correctness. It depends, of course, on what we mean by grammar, but in any case, speaking in terms of idiomaticity makes it easy for us to incorporate to the way of our cultivated speech everything that is generally understood as acceptable in morphology, syntax, semantics, and even in phonetics (see 9a). Therefore, as we have already said above, idiomaticity is believed to operate through and across all the levels of language analysis and to fulfil the function of an "incorporating discipline" of all research in language use.

We believe that breaches against idiomaticity, including faulty pronunciation, surely add to the foreign flavour in the learner's speech and they are the strongest markers of "an accent". In order to avoid this, teachers should pay attention to the idiomatic performance of their pupils from the very beginning. But do they commonly follow this requirement? We are afraid not; what is generally

5. Categorisation of idiomatic expressions

Most linguists engaged in the topic seem to prefer to work with relative terms and criteria, or they even leave the problem alone. Thus some speak of “the least cohesive type of word combination”, having in mind what is known generally as “free combinations”, and, on the other hand, they refer to “loosely fixed” and “relatively frozen” expressions, thinking of ‘collocations’ and ‘idioms’, respectively. Perhaps idioms proper are defined more closely, usually in the traditional way, namely, in terms of semantics. To quote Bahns (1993), idioms are believed to be “relatively frozen expressions whose meanings do not reflect the meanings of their component parts”, e.g., *red herring*, *fly off the handle*, *kick the bucket*, etc. Others are less precise, though, speaking of “lexical items which co-occur with mutual expectancy greater than a chance”, e.g., *rancid butter*, *curry favour*, etc. (Nattinger – DeCarrico 1992). Still others prefer grammatical criteria to semantic ones: generativists in particular pointed to irregularities in idiomatic expressions, and only few of them took fancy in analysing these. It is tempting, indeed, to claim idiomatic expressions to be syntactically irregular, describing them as “asyntactic idioms” or “non-canonical phrases” (Cruse 1986); such expressions as *by and large*, *off with his head*, *as it were*, etc. cannot be generated by the regular rules of grammar. Yet there are also phrases which are altogether grammatical: the well-known and ever-quoted phrase *kick the bucket* has the syntactic structure of a common grammatical verb-phrase. And it is here that even generativists can have a say in the issues raised, asking questions on possible transformations, such as internal modification, passivisation, topicalisation, etc. For example, to use Wasow et al.’s (1983) own phrases, it may be interesting to look for reasons why the syntactic restrictions are absolute in (11) whereas not strict in (12):

- (11) *He kicked the bucket.*
 **The bucket was kicked.*
 **The bucket he kicked.*
- (12) *He will leave no stone unturned.*
 → *He will leave no legal stone unturned.*
We could pull yet more strings.
Those strings, he wouldn't pull for you.

As grammatical criteria alone seem to fall short, linguists interested in idiomaticity issues have been attracted again to semantic ones. No matter how much relative terms they may have used, idioms proper seem to be defined satisfactorily: the total meaning of an idiom is not understood as a simple sum of the meanings of its respective parts. In other words, an idiom is believed to be meaningfully one isolated fact. This “non-compositionality” is undoubtedly a correct criterion for defining genuine idioms, such as *kick the bucket*, *spoil*

someone's goose, etc. Here the idiomatic phrases do not distribute their meanings to their components. However, there are also idiomatically combining expressions the meanings of which are more or less predictable, e.g., *to take advantage of*, *to pull strings*, *to change one's tune*, *to carry weight*, *to button one's lips*, etc. The meanings of these phrases are, undoubtedly, distributed among their parts. Unfortunately, the criterion of non-compositionality will work in favour of a further sub-classification of idiomatic expressions rather than tell us the difference between idiomatic expressions in bulk on the one hand and free combinations on the other hand. Practitioners, namely teachers and learners, could mark idioms proper and collocations in quite a comprehensible way looking upon the former as non-compositional, whereas on the latter as compositional. Two examples at least will illustrate: *to scream blue murder*, *to shoot the breeze* : *to commit murder*, *to shoot a film*. The situation, however, is not as simple as that, and neither is the application of the compositionality criterion so straightforward. Quite a few psycholinguists have been examining compositionality and non-compositionality of idioms since the late 1970s; it is one or the other model of idiom processing, namely, Configuration Hypothesis or Decomposition Hypothesis, according to which speakers are able to process, in one or the other way, the overall figurative meaning through conceptual metaphors which underline the meanings of idiomatic expressions.⁷ In this article we are not concerned with the concrete ways of processing; what we have to stress, however, is the finding that idioms are, reportedly, processed as fast as literal expressions, and sometimes even faster! Hence it follows that learners will be able to master quite a good number of idioms. The only thing they have to remember is restrictions, register and stylistic ones, in their use. Idioms are typically associated with relatively informal and colloquial registers, with popular speech, and they usually contain words of “homey flavour”, e.g., *to climb walls*, *to spill the beans*, *to chew fat*, *to blow one's stack*, *to hit the ceiling*, *to flip one's lid*, *to blow off steam*, etc. Nevertheless, observing these restrictions is observing idiomaticity in the broader sense of the term, and therefore we do not expect any serious difficulties in teaching and learning idioms proper. We are still convinced that learners will face much greater problems with mastering the expressions which border on collocations from one side and on free combinations from the other side. Namely, how do we know that *to answer the door* or *to attend to the correspondence* is idiomatic, whereas **to make a photo* or **to lead a diary* is not? The teaching problem is that the two principal categories of free combina-

⁷ People cannot, as is believed, bypass the literal meanings of an idiom's constituents, and so it is no wonder that some authors believe in idioms being compositional! But, frankly speaking, people do not normally assign putative, context-free literal meanings to the individual idiom's components; it is rather context-sensitive meanings that they have in mind, though subconsciously.

tions and idiomatic expressions overlap (see §4 above), and, if we still insist of keeping them as really clear-cut categories, the dimensions such as grammaticality, non-compositionality, possibly also others, fall short. It seems that the most reliable criterion will be 'conventionality'. For example, *a blue stocking* can be simply one of blue colour, but also a prude woman who does not care for amusement. The latter meaning must have been accepted conventionally, otherwise the utterance *She's a blue stocking, and all she talks about is books whenever we go out together* would be nonsensical. On the other hand, no peculiar, conventional meaning was accepted in *a blue sky*; or better, it has not been accepted yet – while *blue pencil* or *blue murder* are idiomatic already!

The following list of examples will certainly make us consider some more issues:

- (13) *crushing defeat, sound advice, weak tea, pretty girl, red herring, blue stocking, white lie;*
inflict a wound, launch a campaign, mount a horse, carry weight, speak volumes, come a cropper, bite the dust, change one's tune, pull one's leg, curry favour;
pride of lions;
deeply absorbed;
appreciate sincerely, laugh heartily;
blizzards rage, thunder peels, the bell tolls

Learners will very probably sense a certain difference between, for instance, *sound advice* and *red herring*, or between *to mount a horse* and *to speak volumes*. The difference may be worth discussing because of many scholarly, academic reasons, yet from the learner's point of view to master one or the other will probably be one and the same task. Namely, either represents the hyper-class of idiomatic expressions, those unitary phrases which are larger than one word each and in which the respective items have been joined on conventional grounds. Learners, we believe, will have no more difficulties with mastering *to speak volumes* than with *sound advice*, once they have understood the meaning and have been said: "yes, this is the conventional way to say it, yes, this is idiomatic".

Working with a corpus of English idiomatic expressions, such as those illustrated in the list above, one can get an impression that these are far too many and that English speech is nothing but a sort of concatenation of idiomatic phrases. And, indeed, certain words seem to have been used repeatedly very frequently together, or perhaps with a higher frequency than others. No wonder that they become familiar, and hence also fairly fixed. Thus everybody will accept the collocation *He laughed heartily* as natural in English, whereas replacing *heartily* for *cordially* or for *broadly* in the very same context would be generally

turned down as non-idiomatic. We can assume that prosody may have played a significant role in giving preference to one word rather than another: rhythmical circumstances, versification, accent, and the like, in a longer perspective, can never be excluded. All this adds to frequency of use, which very probably has been the primary criterion for claiming conventionalisation. Again, practitioners need not bother about these and similar opinions; what they should be aware of, however, is the fact that idiomatic expressions, like anything else in language, are due to constant evolution and change. Thus the fixation is not always proportional to frequency, at least not in the long term. A closer diachronic investigation would certainly show that certain collocations petered out and were replaced, also because they became trite. The triteness, which is, in a way, the reverse of creativity in language, can also be regarded as a criterion for claiming conventionalisation.

Taking into account such phenomena as a long-time perspective, geographical varieties, dialectal and register peculiarities, we shall not wonder at idioms proper coming into existence out of idiomatic expressions of "lower rank". And viewed in this way, we shall understand better the fact that the hyper-classes of free combinations and idiomatic expressions overlap: a free combination can easily become an idiomatic expression, namely, through the possible frequency of use. Unfortunately, non-native speakers can hardly tell; it is only the intuition of native speakers that recognises a phrase as familiar.

In a way it is true that the English speech may sound like an incessant flow of idiomatic expressions. Taken strictly literally, this idea is an exaggeration of matters; nevertheless, we assume that it is better for learners to accept the view rather than to rely too much on direct transfers from their mother tongue, which can often result in a less idiomatic or downright non-idiomatic performance. Secondly, we argue, too, that idiomatic expressions of any rank or class make it possible for speakers (including learners, of course) to perform with decent fluency, of both the speech-act proper and its content. As we have had it above, since idiomatic expressions make up units of more than one word each, within one sentence, and since speakers are expected to face no problems with mastering the expressions, irrespective of their literal or figurative meanings, they will take advantage of the efficient retrieval of the very same expressions in recurrent situations. Although it may sound rather vulgar, idiomatic expressions, by definition larger than one word, consequently last longer when pronounced, which enables speakers to make full use of the time in which the expression is being uttered. Borrowing Nattinger – DeCarrico's (1992) simile, idiomatic expressions are something like prefabricated parts of speech, and these prefab parts permit speakers to fix their attention onto larger structures of the discourse and onto the subject of the discourse. Namely, if speakers were supposed to zero in narrowly on individual words as these are pronounced, the postulated fluency

as well as the desired idiomaticity of native-like speech would probably be threatened. Suffices to illustrate the point on 'fixed phrases' which are quite variable and described easily by the traditional rules of syntax, and which, in our opinion, represent the transitory, overlapping sphere between free combinations and idiomatic expressions: *a year ago, as far as I know, in my view, I'd like to..., Could you tell me..., Would you mind..., If I were you...* and so on.

REFERENCES

- Bahns, Jens
1993 "Lexical collocations: A contrastive view", *ELT Journal* 47.
- Bloomfield, Leonard
1983 *An introduction to the study of language*. Amsterdam - Philadelphia: John
[1914] Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Cruse, D.A.
1986 *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Fillmore, Charles J. - Paul Kay - J. D. O'Connor
1988 "Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions: The case of 'let alone'".
- Nattinger, James R. - Jeanette S. DeCarrico
1992 *Lexical phrases and language teaching*. Oxford: OUP.
- Kay, Paul
1997 *Words and the grammar of context*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Sag, Ivan A. - Thomas Wasow
1994 "Idioms", *Language* 70, 3: 491-538.
- Sonomura, Marion Okawa
1996 *Idiomaticity in the basic writing of American English*. New York: Peter Lang.