Idiomaticity: A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery inside an Enigma

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Introduction

Simply put, *idiomaticity is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*. As a riddle, idiomaticity exemplifies expressions, which are habitually exhibited as puzzles to be solved. Their morphosyntactic composition (the presence or absence of syntactic constraints) and their resultant non-correlative mono- or polymorphemic lexemic meaning, having an institutionalized social currency other than its grammatical or logical one among the members of a specific speech community, particular profession, or academic discipline, are commonly seen as the primacy of criteria in establishing the idiomaticity of any expression. More often than not, such language-specific expressions are generally expressed in metaphorical or allegorical language that require ingenuity and careful thinking for their solution. The substitution, inversion, deletion, permutation, or augmentation of lexical elements, for instance, is not an uncommon feature in expressions displaying natural and non-natural meaning, that is, what is said and what is meant. What started as a riddle containing one or more descriptive elements soon becomes an enigma expressed in a literal way yet to be decoded by the referent of the elements comprising the expression. Many a time, the obscure or puzzling nature communicated by the expression in question, their count numbering in the thousands, becomes the very mystery in which an expression is metaphorically or allegorically wrapped.

Attempts at explaining the mysterious quality of such conventionalized constructions with idiosyncratic meaning baffles and perplexes the intellect, and particularly second or foreign language learners of English, to the point where, despite concerted efforts to rationalize their uses in human language, they remain, in more ways than one, *an enigma inside a mystery wrapped in a riddle*. Defining them precisely has remained a conundrum too great to solve to the satisfaction of all those laboring to understand the mysterious and puzzling nature of idiomaticity. As a result, any discussion of the term itself, not to mention the features or characteristics employed to date to define expressions exemplifying idiomatic

tendencies, has resulted in a nomenclature so vast that anyone attempting to cognize its totality would most certainly fall short in so doing. Suffice to note that today a wide range of names, terms, labels, and concepts are closely associated with investigations involving matters of idiomaticity.

In what follows I shall attempt, to the extent possible, to cover the multitude of expressions closely associated with "idiomaticity" in an effort to underscore the key role it plays in human cognition and interaction. I begin by first "unwrapping" the riddle of the monolexemic term itself and then show some of the mystery behind the main connotations in it. This is followed by an explication of a line of argument intended to shepherd curriculum development to better organize and describe idiomatic learning. Operating across disciplinary boundaries, balancing surface-level with deep-level knowledge of idiomaticity, "unpacking" standards to identify coverage of idiomatic content and skills, and framing the purpose of idiomatic learning within viable pedagogic-technological constructs are but a select few suggestions made herein to optimize idiomatic learning.

ELT Dimensions

In a recent interview I opined that IDIOMATICITY is "much like an iceberg floating quietly through the night. And yet, at any given time, only 10% of it is visible to the naked eye. The remaining 90% remains submerged. It is that 90% that needs to be illuminated for in that 90% we find all these terms dotting our academic and social language" (J. Liontas, personal interview in *IJLTR*, 2017a, p. 150). Anyone attempting to make heads or tails of the terms closely associated with idiomaticity would quite literally see his head spin without end, causing him to become dazed and confused.

True enough, the professional literature is packed like sardines with terms and descriptions that in many respects underlie the same phenomenon this entry seeks to address: *idiomaticity*, or, to put it laconically, the study of idioms and idiomatic language. Simple enough, right? Yet such a triumphant declaration only begins to *scratch the surface* of the subject in the most superficial way possible. One would even be forgiven in the use of yet another expression closely associated with the "iceberg" metaphor (introduced initially as a simile) above: *the tip of the iceberg*. And just as all floating icebergs have a significant proportion of their mass below the surface of the water, the very explanation just offered is so much bigger than what was first expressed. In fact, it is highly advisable that the reader goes beyond what appears to be so obvious and *scratches beneath the surface* to see what truly lies just below the water line.

Initiating but the briefest investigation of the monolexemic word ID-I-O-MA-TIC-I-TY reveals that it is much more than a specialized term comprised of 7 syllables and 12 characters. Minimally concealed behind those distinct syllables and characters are two terms, *idiomatic* and *idiom*, the definitions of which are not easily or fully grasped even by informed terminologists willing to define and catalogue them. The first of these two terms, *idiomatic*—from Ancient Greek ἰδιωματικός (*idiōmatikós*, "related to an idiom"), from ἰδίωμα (*idíōma*, "idiomatic")—holds that

it is a peculiarity characteristic of, or in keeping with, the way a language is ordinarily and naturally used by its native speakers. This peculiarity is omnipresent in the expressions, constructions, or phraseology approved by the peculiar usage of a language. The styles, manners, and modes of expression in a language differ in pragmatic use among formal and informal social settings and among the members of a specific speech community, particular profession, or academic discipline. The quality of being idiomatic is characterized by using or denoting vernacular or colloquial expressions that are institutionalized and natural to a native speaker. In short, it is the proficient and appropriate use of such words and phrases, even when they discernibly deviate from a strictly grammatical or logical use of words, that makes speech idiomatic and natural in expression.

The observation that the first four syllables, *idioma*, reference "language" in Spanish aside, the second term contained in the lexeme "idiomaticity," namely *idiom*—from Ancient Greek ἰδίωμα (*idíōma*, "special feature, special phrasing, a peculiarity"), from ἴδιος (*ídios*, "one's own, private, peculiar")—holds that it is a phrase established by popular usage as having a unitary holistic figurative meaning conventionally understood by native speakers that is unrelated to and undeducible from the individual literal meanings of its constituent elements, or from the general grammatical rules of a language.

By extension, a phrase, a group of words generally synonymous with a "form of expression" and often carrying a special idiomatic meaning, may be a *euphemism*, a *saying* or *proverb*, a *fixed expression*, a *figure of speech*, and so on. In linguistic analysis, a phrase is a group of words (or possibly a single word) that functions as a constituent in the syntax of a sentence, a single unit within a grammatical hierarchy. However, its technical use has a phrase typically appearing within a clause, that is, the smallest grammatical unit that can express a complete proposition consisting of a subject and a predicate (typically a verb phrase or a verb with objects and modifiers). A phrase can also be a clause in itself or contain a clause within it.

In common use, a phrase may have either a "figurative" meaning or a "literal" meaning. The former is achieved when the use of words or phrase comprising the unit diverge from their proper dictionary definitions in order to imply a more multilayered understanding of a non-literal meaning or enhanced rhetoric effect. When words are associated, matched, or connected with other normally unrelated words or meanings, *figurative* (or *non-literal*) *language* use is attained. *Allusion, cliché, hyperbole, idiom, irony, metalepsis, metaphor, metonymy, onomatopoeia, oxymoron, paradox, personification, polysemy, proverb, pun, simile,* and *synecdoche* are but some of the multitude of forms figurative language can take. The latter, *literal meaning,* is achieved when a phrase uses words exactly according to their conventionally proper meanings or denotation. When words preserve their proper meaning irrespective of the context in which they are used, they preserve a meaning that corresponds precisely to the intended meaning of the individual words. Literal language is thus preserved.

The English language, according to Jackendoff (1997), is estimated to have some 25,000 idiomatic expressions that rather than being strictly compositional, are deliberately figurative in nature. They occur frequently in the thousands in all

languages. But "idiom," the relatively modern expression used in English since the late 1500s, is also categorized as *formulaic language*, or *formulaic sequence*. Wray (2002) defines formulaic sequence as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated, that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar" (p. 9). Formulaic sequences are omnipresent in language use and "make up a large proportion of any discourse" (Schmitt, 2004, p. 1). Along with *pause fillers* (e.g., "Like," "Er," or "Uhm") and *conversational speech formulas* (e.g., "You've got to be kidding," "Shut up!," "Excuse me?" or "Hang on a minute"), formulaic sequences can be of any length and can be used to express messages, functions, and social solidarity and process information very fast without communication misunderstanding (Schmitt, 2004).

Formulaic sequences aside, an idiom is frequently recognized to be a *figure of speech* or *rhetorical figure*, a figurative language often realized in a phrase or single word having a specialized meaning not based on the ordinary literal meaning of the phrase's constitutive words. Figures of speech—divided in schemes (form or shape) and tropes (change of word meaning) by scholars of classical Western rhetoric—come in many forms and varieties and provide emphasis, freshness of expression, or clarity via a special repetition, arrangement, or omission of words with literal meaning, or ambiguity between literal and figurative interpretation. DiYanni (1990) maintains that rhetoricians have catalogued more than 250 different *figures of speech.* By all accounts, figures of speech contradict the *principle of semantic compositionality*: the meaning of a complex expression is determined by, and should be constructed from, the meanings of its constituent expressions and the rules used to combine them. Expressed differently, one should be in a position to understand the (meaning of a) whole if one understands (the meanings of) each of the parts that make up the whole (Szabó, 2013).

In most linguistic accounts of idioms to date (see, for example, Portner, 2005; Radford, 2004), compositionality is the principal notion employed in the analysis of idioms. Because of space limitations, I will spare the reader a further compositional analysis of the widely employed canonic idiom, *to kick the bucket*, save for one brief observation: a compositional reading of the ordinary literal meaning of the phrase's constitutive words (the kicking of an actual, physical bucket, literally) does not equate the non-compositional, and much more likely, idiomatic reading, *to die*. The idiomatic reading is essentially independent of the literal reading and is, by all accounts, stored in memory as a single lexical item: to kick the bucket—to die.

As demonstrated, understanding idiomaticity is not possible without an explanation and deep understanding of a host of terms and concepts closely associated with it. What started as a simple and unassertive definition of two terms—*idiomatic* and *idiom*—soon ballooned to include further discussion of the terminology contained in those terms such as *phrase* and *literal/figurative meaning*, which in turn, necessitated a further discussion, however cursory, of *formulaic language* or *formulaic sequences, figures of speech* or *rhetorical figures, pause fillers, conversational speech formulas, principle of semantic compositionality,* and *literal/figurative language*, not to

mention all those "other" labels and linguistic concepts underlying these terms or the multitude of figurative forms associated with *figurative language*.

And the discussion is far from complete. We have yet to address PHRASEOLOGY *per se* (Granger & Meunier, 2008), the study of fixed expressions, or the basic units of analysis in phraseology often collectively referred to as *phrasemes, phraseologisms*, or *phraseological units*, which include, among many, *compounds, collocations, idioms, idiomatic/lexical phrases* or *lexical bundles, prefabricated phrases/patterns/routines* or *prefabs, phrasal lexemes, phrasal verbs, set phrase* or *a set of thoughts, routine formulas, irreversible binomials* or *Siamese twins, trinomials, multiword lexemes* or *multiword lexical units, multiword chunks/expressions/phrases/constructions/sequences/building blocks, and multiword/multiunit strings* or *multi-morphemic sequences/units/utterances/phrases/sentences* (in computational linguistics especially). Nor have we mentioned yet the syntactic modifications movement (passivization, raising constructions, and clefting) separable constituencies within *mobile idioms* can undergo and still maintain their idiomatic meaning while other *fixed idioms,* used only in a routine form, do not (Horn, 2003).

Similarly, we have steered clear of the socio- and psycho-linguistic or pragmatic views on idiomaticity or those posited in transformational-generative linguistics or usage-based cognitive linguistics/construction grammar to avoid long explanations and summaries of transformational-generative paradigms. Not doing so would require elaborate accounts of the earliest English adaptations of phraseology within the sociocultural, transformational-generative, naturalist, syntactic, pragmatic, or computational approaches to date, including representative accounts concerning the semantic representations of phrasal idioms, (sub-)classes and classification-stratification of idioms (and related lexicalised expressions) in semantic taxonomies based on principles of compositionality, degrees of metaphoric transparency, and form-meaning relationships, particularly those involving form, syntax, semantics, and discourse function (deixis, modality, information structure). More recently, models of L1-L2 idiom comprehension and production and methodological paradigms concerned with lexical (co-)occurrences (and a variety of interrelated concepts such as *n*-grams, collocations, colligations, and collostructions, to name but a few) and connected to corpus linguistics or machine translation (Sag, Baldwin, Bond, Copestake, & Flickinger, 2002; Sinclair, 2004) were equally unaddressed for reasons already stated.

Although clearly related, the differing nuances in the specific terms commonly used in idiomatology, phraseology, lexicography, or idiomatics to denote idiomatic and multiword sequences are simply too voluminous to accurately do justice in a brief entry such as this. Indubitably, these terms exemplify the vast domain of theoretical perspectives and backgrounds of the authors, who during the past several decades have continuously and designedly expanded the nomenclature of idiomaticity heretofore presented to critical new heights. Indubitably, the sheer magnitude of the different "idiom types," including the rich overlap in terminology, theoretical assumptions, and parameter settings, challenges our collective understanding of how best to spearhead selective data-driven pedagogic-technological practices that will indeed address the breadth and depth of idiomaticity in

a systematic and productive way across the curriculum for the benefit of all learners. Eschewing such responsibility will only embolden the truth conditions of the entry's opening "iceberg" metaphor that despite concerted effort to "scratch beneath the surface" to see what truly lies just below the water line, at least declared so initially, idiomaticity is, and remains, *a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*.

Future Directions

All idioms are (idiomatic) expressions, but not all (idiomatic) expressions are idioms proper. Because *idiomaticity* entails the study of idioms and idiomatic language, it is logical to postulate that "idiomatic learning" in and of itself becomes the *modus operandi* that drives curricular decision making and peda-gogic-technological constructs integration. One useful approach to organizing and applying *idiomatic learning* then is to think about the breadth and depth of the learning itself. Put simply, *breadth of idiomatic learning* refers to the full span of knowledge of idiomaticity, including, but not limited to, the graphophono-logical, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic parameters that underlie linguistic productivity and natural language use, not to mention the possible transformations of specific elements known to operate through and across all levels of language analysis. Conversely, *depth of idiomatic learning* refers to the extent to which specific types of idiomatic expressions are not only focused upon, magnified, or studied, but, more importantly, practiced purposefully, assessed assiduously, and evaluated authentically. Their combined tripartite focus, coupled with their ubiquity and heterogeneous properties, yields what I call the *breadth and depth of understanding idiomaticity.* Space limits preclude a more detailed account of the framework here advocated. (An extensive account is offered in Liontas, forthcoming.) In what follows, I only offer an abridged col-lection of six research-to-practice directions that endeavor to optimize idiomatic learning. Individually and collectively, these directions are intricately linked in manifold and dynamic ways that hold much promise in the years ahead:

1. *Across disciplinary boundaries in a coherent and constructive way.* Teachers and lan-guage practitioners alike are counseled to operate across disciplinary bounda-ries in ways that take full advantage of the research knowledge made available to date. If "what's past is prologue," *understanding idiomaticity* should be drawn from different disciplines so as to widen the conversation of various idiomatic topics without impeding unnecessarily the complexity of each topic under dis-cussion. For optimal results, discussions should cover many classifications and typologies and should highlight the graphophonological, morphological, syn-tactic, semantic, and pragmatic parameters known to affect the comprehension and production of idiomaticity proper within real-world settings.

2. *Move beyond terminology and definitions.* Though amassing a representative assortment of idiomatic terms and their definition is advisable, concerted effort should be appropriated to balance surface-level with deep-level

knowledge of idiomaticity. *Surface-level knowledge of idiomaticity* entails a cursory awareness of the various types of idiomatic expressions commonly used for rhetorical and communicative effect. In contrast, *deep-level knowledge of idiomaticity* involves knowing and appreciating the "creative genius" behind the many different facets of idiomatic language, including knowledge of how idiomatic expressions are (meta)linguistically and socioculturally motivated across time and space in natural language use.

3. *Seek steady progress in idiomatic learning, not perfection.* There is no such thing as attaining the perfect balance of the breadth and depth of understanding idiomaticity, only the imperfect attempts of having tried and failed many times over. Perfection is but a state of illusion constantly reminding us of the odyssey that idiomatic learning rightly is. In the end, it is steady *progress*, not perfection, that determines the *breadth* and *depth of idiomatic learning.* Progress alone resolves how healthy (broad and wide) or how robust (deep and strong) the resulting knowledge of idiomaticity really is. Appositely, curricular goals should always act as flexible "moving goalposts" in the learning structure to specify desired language progress along the proficiency scale.

4. *Prioritize what students "should know" and "be able to do."* "Breadth over depth" is defensible in terms of exploring learning outcomes deemed critically valuable to understanding the vast network of knowledge closely associated with receptive-productive manifestations of idiomaticity proper. "Depth over breadth" is equally justifiable in terms of applying selective idiomatic content in culturally appropriate authentic constructs in which prior idiomaticity proper manifestations are assessed and evaluated in meaningful, pragmatic ways. Neither priority is more or less important than the other, as attaining either one will depend largely upon the cognitive-intellectual needs, wants, and interests of the students who are expected to demonstrate mastery of literal and non-literal (figurative) language across the curriculum.

5. *Author and implement "measurable" and "attainable" learning targets from day one.* Learning targets that explicitly prioritize and focus on specific idiomatic content and skill acquisition, at least those that are purported to be both "measurable" and "attainable," determine to a large extent the exclusive lessons, activities, and technological resources and tools teachers and language practitioners alike will employ to personalize student learning within confirmed research-based practices. Such intentional focus will also help in selecting the most appropriate and productive formative, summative, and alternative assessments that are certain to acclaim the desired learning outcomes so engendered by teachers and students alike.

6. *Let the standards guide your path of discovery.* "Unpacking" (national or state-mandated) curricular and professional standards to identify the idiomatic content each standard covers and the performance skills students are expected to master to demonstrate their proficiency provides keen insight and an open perspective into what it actually means to impact student learning at each grade level and across the entire K-16 curriculum. A critical but thoughtful review of standards addressing matters of idiomaticity resolves what content

is essential for idiomatic instruction at each grade level. Insights gleaned from such reviews can help teachers and language practitioners alike to properly design the type of learning activities and tasks that is ever so naturally embedded in meaningful interactions.

With apt curriculum planning, guided training, and committed teacher support, students are certain to benefit from a continuous use of language skills and knowledge development specific to those idiomatic expressions covered in lower-level coursework and expanded upon in advanced upper level courses. (For additional pedagogic-technological constructs detailing idiomatic learning across the curriculum, even at the tertiary level, see Liontas, 2015, 2017b, 2018.) Above all, students are assured the experience and practice such expressions command in natural language use. In the process of "unwrapping the riddle," teachers and students alike are certain to come to "know" and "solve" the mystery inside an enigma that is idiomaticity proper.

And although such puzzling explanations may still be woven into the fabric of idiomatology or phraseology to affirmatively demythologize enduring misunderstandings and mischaracterizations of idiomatic phenomena to date, the strength of each new explanation offered will assuredly be judged by the power of the accepted proposition advanced. It is only logical to surmise that the ensuing discussion of the *breadth and depth of understanding idiomaticity* will continue to expand with each new discovery made in *idiomatics*, a field in its own right, its evolving discipline character yet to be fully understood by those of us toiling to define its premises and explain its parameters within the greater field of linguistics and applied linguistics with commanding control and committed conviction, bar none. In the end, idiomatologists, phraseologists, and terminologists the world over should welcome the challenge to agree to disagree without being disagreeable that idiomaticity may indeed be *a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*. Or is it *an enigma inside a mystery wrapped in a riddle?*

Only time will tell. The jury is still out.

SEE ALSO: Exploring Figurative Language Across the Curriculum; Proverbs and Idioms in Raising Cultural Awareness; Teaching Idiomatic Language in Context

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