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The grammaticalization of English idioms: a hypothesis for teaching purposes

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades an important number of studies have turned their attention to phraseology producing works that range from structural and generative-transformational to functional descriptions of English idiomatic expressions with the result that these lexico-grammatical elements of the English language – traditionally seen as «unique cases from which no rules can be derived» (Sornig, 1988, 285) – have in the years come to acquire some form of categorization within grammars and dictionaries. For instance, in their prestigious dictionary of idiomatic expressions, Cowie *et al.* (1983) record important rules of structure, meaning and use regarding a countless number of phrase, clause and sentence idioms. More recently in 1999, *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* dedicates ample space to corpus-based structural descriptions and functional interpretations of a huge quantity of idiomatic language. The idea to «control» greater and greater portions of the language, and of phraseology especially, has therefore taken hold of linguists who, in the wake of Lewis's revolutionary work (1993), advocate for a new vision of language consisting of «multi-word chunks» whose patterns should be clearly expounded.

This relatively new approach has, however, generally remained tied to the theoretical sphere of linguistic studies. Not a great deal has permeated these layers of research in order to reach the more practical area of English Language Teaching. Proof lies in the examination of the majority of courses for foreign learners of English where, on the whole, idiomatic expressions are still presented at the end of didactic units and by means of exercises that fail to unveil their complex nature and strong connections with every day language. Consequently, learners generally come to regard idioms as un-

manageable lexical items unrelated to real English but, nonetheless, indispensable to pass English language examinations.

2. THE EXPOSURE OF A SYNTACTIC, SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC GRAMMAR

If there has been a certain resistance to the teaching and the learning of English idioms, it is – after all – because of their very complex nature. Despite the general definition given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (s. v. Idiom) as

> 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 signification other than its grammatical or logical one,

idioms in reality range from non-literal multiword expressions characterized by both invariance and restricted variance, semi-literal multiword expressions that are both invariant and variant, right down to literal multiword expressions that are invariant or have a restricted variance (cf. Fernando, 1996, 32). Moreover, to complicate things further, within each of these subclasses, every idiom has its own syntactic, semantic and pragmatic configuration.

Although this complex nature cannot be changed, to work on this nature and fully expose it to learners could however change the general reticence towards idiom teaching and learning. The uncovering of a grammar of English idioms which up to now has been generally concealed from learners could possibly be a step in the right direction towards a more positive learner attitude.

What is meant by «uncovering a concealed grammar of English idioms to learners» is essentially exposing – in its most intricate parts – what to the native speaker is an instinctive and often impossible element of language to explain. Paradoxically, although corpus-based frequency and distribution studies have shown that English idioms on the whole are rather infrequent in written and spoken texts, the majority of native speakers – regardless of their level of education – are normally familiar with an unlimited number of them (Minugh, 2001). Idiomatic expressions are, after all, the patrimony of a culture and tradition; they represent centuries of life in a determined sociolinguistic context and geographical setting and are therefore the heart and soul of a

linguistic community. It is precisely this culture-bound nature that makes them unmanageable for learners who do not belong to the same linguistic community and who cannot instinctively – as native speakers do – recognize a clear semantic, pragmatic and syntactic pattern. What can therefore not be naturally and instinctively recognized, must therefore be made recognizable through due analysis and reflection: learners must be made aware that the meaning, use and structure of idioms can, like other elements of the English language, also be controlled. What learners need is to discern that idioms are not just obtuse lexical units that have to be learnt off by heart for exam purposes, but that they are an important part of any linguistic heritage and that their existence in spoken and written texts has a reason. So if learners are to appreciate idioms and acquire them with some success, their existence needs motivating and this may be done by exploiting all the linguistic information now available.

2.1. Meaning control

The first thing learners of English should be aware of is that because idioms are so strongly tied to the culture and history of the people that generate them, their top structures always tell a story that justifies their bottom meanings. If we consider the multitude of expressions that originate from sailor speech, from the speech of soldiers, from the language of huntsmen, from life lived with all sorts of animals such as cats (*to rub the wrong way*), cattle (*to kill the fatted calf*), sheep (*as meek as a lamb*), swine (*to kick the bucket*) [1], birds (*to kill two birds with one stone*), from life lived in the open air in contact with nature (*to be out of wood*), (*to blow hot and cold*) [2], or at home round the dinner table with family or friends (*to share one's last crust with*), or from a number of games (*to play fair*; *two can play at that game*) and pastimes like music and dancing (*to play first or second fiddle*; *to be in tune*; *to open the ball*), it suddenly becomes quite clear that idiomatic expressions unfold stories that suddenly give a sense to their real meanings. An awareness of the source and the lexical area to which an idiom belongs can illumine its non-literal meaning and instil in the learner that analytical meaning-deciphering approach when having to confront other unknown idioms.

[1] It has been alleged that bucket is a name in Norfolk for the beam upon which a pig is suspended after it has been slaughtered (cf. *OED* s. v. bucket).

[2] Here the reference is to the weather.

Another way in which the meaning of idioms can be controlled is through a contrastive analysis with the learners mother-tongue. L1 has traditionally been discouraged in the foreign language classroom, but it is instead important to recognize the value of discussing and comparing the same linguistic aspect in the two languages at play (Taylor, 1990, 3). To give an equivalent translation of an idiomatic expression where possible saves time, energy and is undoubtedly more effective in bringing home the full meaning to learners. Moreover, it can be encouraging for learners to see that Italian and English idiomatic equivalents, for example, can even have syntactic structures that are more or less congruent. In the examples that follow (cf. Pinnavaia, forthcoming), the English and Italian languages have idiomatic equivalents within the lexical area of food and drink with equivalent meanings being conveyed by syntactic constructions that are more or less similar: *to have a finger in the pie* and *avere le mani in pasta*, *to make mincemeat of someone* and *fare polpette di qualcuno* in fact reveal a very similar syntactic construction characterized by a hyponym-superordinate relationship; a slightly less similar syntactic construction can be illustrated by the pairs *you don't understand a fig – non capsici un fico secco* and *to earn one's bread and butter – guadagnarsi il pane* whereby one of each pair holds an extra piece of information compared to the other; lastly less similar syntactic constructions account for idiomatic pairs such as *crumbs!* for *capperi!*, *a storm in a tea-cup* for *una tempesta in un bicchiere d'acqua*, *to be in the soup* for *essere nei pasticci*, *the icing on the cake* for *la ciliegina sulla torta* and *to be a squeezed orange* for *essere un limone spremuto*. The similarities and differences in expressions between one language and the other are again explicable in terms of the history and the life of the people whose language they belong to and exposing them can be a way of raising learners' confidence in dealing with such elements usually considered a59s being remote from their own linguistic tradition.

Thirdly, to exploit all the semantic analyses carried out on formulaic language by presenting learners with idioms that belong to similar or even contrasting categories of meaning could also be a pedagogical advantage. For instance, idioms such as *steer clear*, *at arm's length*, *keep something at bay*, *keep a low profile*, *give someone a cold shoulder*, *turn a blind eye to something*, *to have an axe to grind*, *to jump on the bandwagon* and *to get your teeth into something* all denote some form of involvement and interest (cf. Goodale, 1995); drawing attention to relations such as these accompanied by information that distinguishes one type of involvement from another should certainly help learners to fix form-meaning patterns even where idioms are concerned.

2.2. Structure control

Besides being more or less semantically transparent, idioms – it has been said – are idiosyncratic syntactic structures which, depending on their level of idiomaticity, can be more or less fixed. This is common knowledge to native speakers of English as well as English language researchers, but to learners this is often unclear information. For sake of simplicity, learners are in fact normally told that idioms are inflexible and cannot be transformed in any way. This is a myth that should be exploded by showing learners that while some idioms cannot normally admit any type of variation (e. g. *a red herring*), others can accept variations both of the lexical kind – for example, the idiom *steer clear of someone or something* can also admit the lexemes *keep* and *stay* – and of the grammatical kind so that there are idioms that can admit passivization e. g. *Jane pulled strings for Sue* which can become *Sue had her strings pulled by Jane*, idioms that can admit conjunct movement e. g. *Sue came to terms with Jane* can become *Sue and Jane came to terms*, idioms that can have their subject raised e. g. *it strikes my mind that Jim…* can become *Jim strikes my mind as….*, or idioms that may undergo the rule of There insertion e. g. *a problem cropped up* and *there cropped up a problem* (Newmeyer, 1974, 328-336).

Recent research (Coffey, 2001; Tucker, 2001) has moreover been showing how idiomatic expressions – including some of the traditionally more fixed kind – are quite frequently transformed for humorous or stylistic effects by means of lexical variations applied to base forms through lexical additions (e. g. *a flash in the economic pan* instead of *a flash in the pan* (Barkema, 1996, 144)), lexical deletions (e. g. *hawks* instead of *hawks and doves* (Pinnavaia, 2000, 345)), permutations (*the rat was smelled* instead of *he/she smelled a rat* (Pinnavaia, 2000, 344)) and substitutions (*the proof of the beer is in the drinking* instead of *the proof of the pudding is in the eating* (Barkema, 1996, 148)); or by means of grammatical variations concerning number (*sitting ducks* instead of *sitting duck* (Barkema, 1996, 144)) or negative or positive polarity (*he lifted a finger* instead of *he didn't lift a finger* (Barkema 1996, 149)). These variations, some of which are regarded as lexicalized expressions and others as forms of wordplay or punning, can only confuse learners who have not been trained to recognize them and comprehend them. It is therefore important, wherever possible, to highlight the versatility of idioms and the differences between base and variant structures so that learners might especially be aided in the decoding process of the English language which, particularly in journalistic and prose literature, is coming to rely more and more on manipulated idiomatic expressions in order to express clear, to-the-point notions and opinions.

2.3. Function control

That idioms are so readily transformed in order to achieve certain stylistic effects testifies to the fact that «as a rule, phraseological units, and idioms in particular, contribute to the expressive value of a text» (Glaeser, 1986, 42). By neatly enclosing within their structures a set meaning and function, idioms are themselves texts with a very strong communicative force. This explains why according to research findings (cf. Moon, 1994, 1998, 2001) they are predominant in text types, such as advertisements, newspaper articles, prose fiction and public speeches, where the presumed interactivity between the writer/speaker and reader/listener is high.

The functional force of idioms is therefore the third and last important aspect that should be investigated and exposed to learners of English. Learners should be encouraged to look for the textual function in each idiom encountered, and thus be made to distinguish between formal and informal, between polite and derogatory, general English or special English idiomatic expressions in order to fully understand the text in which they appear. Through an understanding of the function of idioms it also becomes easier to understand the nuances between idioms that appear synonymous. Lattey (1986, 227), for example, considers how the idioms *to go to bat for someone* and *to stand/stick up for someone*, seemingly equivalent, are in reality quite different: while *to go to bat for someone* tends to be an initiatory move, *stand/stick up for someone* is used to describe behaviour in an argument or a fight that is already in progress where that person being stood up for has been attacked. To be able to carry out such an analysis, learners need to be made aware of the importance of the context in which the idioms appear and the need to analyse it closely. The people, the settings and the themes involved in any text are elements that evidently determine the use of one idiom or another and are indispensable cues for the decoding of its functional force. By analysing idioms in their contexts, learners can be encouraged to draw up a fine web of interrelations between pairs of idioms that are the reverses of each other (e. g. *to lure someone into a trap* and *to walk into someone's trap*, where the first describes a negative effect on the person being lured and the second on the actor), opposites of each other (e. g. *it is no bed of roses* and *it's a piece of cake* (Lattey, 1986, 225-226)) and that have positive rather than negative impacts on the entities mentioned (e. g. *to pull someone's leg* which has positive connotations, while *to take the mickey* has negative ones).

CONCLUSIONS

For learners of English to perceive patterns and relations regarding the meaning, the structure and the function of English idioms encountered is what is ultimately most auspicable here. The final aim of this article is indeed to underline once again the importance of making learners active participants in the learning process. It has been suggested here that learners, provided with the full array of instruments of analysis retrieved through years of theoretical research in the field of idiomatic expressions, can adopt the right attitude to handle such complex signs. The exposure to a full grammar of idioms should in fact consent learners to acquire a more curious and analytical approach: the only real key to a better passive and active knowledge of idioms.

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