

NAME : UBAID SAEED
ID : 16902
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Idioms and its role in English Language

IDIOM :

Idioms are a type of figurative language, which means they are not always meant to be taken literally. Idioms express a particular sentiment, but they do not literally mean what the individual words themselves mean.

THE ROLE OF IDIOMS :

You have probably heard of idioms. They are also called sayings, proverbs, phrases or idiomatic expressions. You might have read about them and learned some of them in school when you were a child. Beyond that the vast majority of people are probably unaware of how widespread and important idioms are in their own language – their mother tongue. Most of us don't think much about idioms. We might not realise how hugely important they are in the speaking of our own language. We use them without thinking, accepting that they are part of the language and that most of our fellow native speakers will know what they mean. But to anyone learning any new language like English as a second language, idioms can present quite a problem!

THE ROLE OF IDIOMS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

“Since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum.” Cooper, 1998

The English language being very flexible constantly enriches its vocabulary with words invented by language speakers, making it more colourful with new idiomatic expressions, and, at times, refills its stocks with the borrowings and neologisms. English just amazes by its extraordinary linguistic diversity. The focus of this paper is to share consideration on the importance of idioms for non-native speakers as part of their mastery of the English language. Understanding the lexicon of English demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have connotative word comprehension and more - an understanding of figurative language. Idioms fall into the latter category. Learning idioms is certainly not a piece of cake (very easy), but once you know them, they can be a lot of fun, and anyway, because English people use idioms nonstop you will be all

at sea (totally confused) in most conversations until you learn the ropes (understand how things work). Idioms share cultural and historical information and broaden people's understanding and manipulation of a language. Among the various definitions of idioms are:

(1) the language peculiar to a people, country, class, community or, more rarely, an individual.

(2) a construction or expression having a meaning different from the literal one or not according to the usual patterns of the language /New Webster's Dictionary, 1993/. It is the second definition that best suits the focus of this paper.

Professor Konni defined idiom "as a stable combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning" /Kuoni, 1970/. This definition emphasizes two inherent and very important features of idiomatic expressions. Idioms have lexical and grammatical stability. It implies that they are fixed in their form, hence any substitution and rearrangement in their structure can lead to a complete loss of their primary meaning. Idioms are always something special about any language; they build up some distinctive features which differ one language from another. What is more, idioms reflect certain cultural traditions and depict the national character. Idioms are not a separate part of the language which one can choose either to use or to omit, but they form an essential part of the general vocabulary of English. A description of how the vocabulary of the language is growing and changing will help to place idioms in perspective. Idioms appear in every language, and English has thousands of them. They are often confusing because the meaning of the whole group of words taken together has little, often nothing, to do with the meanings of the words taken one by one. In order to understand a language, we must know what the idioms in that language mean. If we try to figure out the meaning of an idiom literally, word by word, we will get befuddled. We have to know its hidden meaning. Because of idioms, learning a language can be complicated. Since vocabulary and culture are intertwined, speakers can gain more vocabulary through idioms and conversely, can learn more about idioms from being exposed to the target culture. The more comprehensible input there is, the more learners' listening, speaking, writing and reading skills will improve. There are certain things that happen in every culture and there are idioms to deal with them. If you are in Italy or Turkey and you say you are "as hungry as a wolf" then you are starving. In Finnish, "with long teeth" means you are doing something that you really don't want to do. In French, "to have long teeth" means you are ambitious. If it is raining in large amounts, most cultures have an interesting way of saying that: In English, it would be "raining cats and dogs", In Africa, they might say "it's raining old women with clubs." Many languages refer to heavy rain as coming in buckets or as rain coming out of a bucket. In Norway they say "it's raining female trolls"; The Irish say "it's throwing cobblers knives." An idiom's semantics can be influenced by national colouring. There are many cases when phrases are based on an old English prejudice, and a similar prejudice known in other countries of the

world may lead the reader to some misunderstanding. For instance, “a black cat crossed her way” would mean different things to people of different nationalities. To the English people, a black cat would mean good luck to the extent that some students are even said to be always looking for a black cat crossing their path on the way to the college exams. To Americans, it is mostly a black cat that would mean “bad luck”.

All these examples cited above, prove the divisibility and variability of phraseological units in a particular discourse situation – convincing manifestations of their instability. Idioms are figurative units, they describe the situation in a metaphoric way. They are often termed as “dead” or “fixed (stable)” metaphors, because many instances of realia they used to denote have already ceased to exist, as a result, the metaphoric character is lost to the modern speaker. Some linguists call them “sleeping” metaphors rather than “dead”: there are speakers who are very good at “waking them up”. Educated people, students of language often play upon these idioms and make them serve their purposes. Thus, the metaphor underlying an idiom is “brought to life” and gains its new colours. In Russian linguistics the semantic configuration of an idiom is termed “deformation”, 1988. Idiomatic expressions pervade English with a peculiar flavour and give it astounding variety, bright character and colour. They help language learners understand English culture, penetrate into customs and lifestyle of the English people, and gain a deeper insight into the English history. However, learning idioms presents a host of difficulties to English learners, primarily because they don’t know the culture and history behind English idioms. That is why they often use idioms incongruous with the situation. Indeed, English learners utilize idiomatic expressions very carefully, being afraid of using them incorrectly and being misunderstood. According to Cooper (1999), idiom study presents a special language problem for all language learners because the figurative meaning is unpredictable. To conclude we may state that the sheer number of idioms and their high frequency in discourse make them an important aspect of vocabulary acquisition and language learning in general. One of the approaches to defining this linguistic phenomenon stresses that an idiom is a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers of the language. It proves that only people who are very good at speaking English can adequately and to the point use idiomatic expressions in their speech. English is a language with a vast idiomatic basis, which makes its learning very exciting and intriguing. So grasping the use of idioms is an essential part of learning English.

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