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AHMAD ROSHIDI AMRAN

ISSN 0128-2635



THE IDIOMATICITY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Most students of English as a second or foreign language believe that they have mastered the language when they can express themselves fluently and grammatically, and that it is not necessary for them to learn the language frills such as the colloquial forms and the idiomatic expressions. These students view the formal nature of the colloquial and idiomatic expressions as irrelevant in the process of acquiring the target language. On the contrary, idiomatic expressions form very important part of the English language. They give life and richness to the language by enabling it to absorb new concepts which need to be expressed linguistically in a different and more interesting way. Idiomatic expressions are widely used by most native speakers of English in their everyday conversations.

What are idiomatic expressions and why do they pose problems to students of English as a second or foreign language? Idiomatic expressions are linguistically termed as figurative language which includes idioms, proverbs, similes, metaphors, colloquial and common expressions. Brief definitions of the different types of figurative language would enhance further understanding of the term.

An idiom is a phrase consisting of a group of words which together form a unit and the meaning of which is different from the constituent words. For instance, the group of words 'take it easy' is an idiom which means 'relax'. However, the word 'take' alone or the word 'easy' alone does not mean 'relax'. When these words are combined, they form a unit which means 'relax'. 'Hot air' which means 'empty promises' is different from the meanings of the words 'hot' and 'air' individually. Similarly, the figurative meaning of 'cut and dried' (decided or expected before hand) is different from the literal meanings of the constituent words.

A proverb is a short well-known saying which is related to the culture in which the language is spoken, with the intention of teaching good behaviour and moral, reminding or praising. 'Every dog has its day' which means 'everyone will have his chance in life' is an example of a proverb with the intention of teaching. 'To turn over a new leaf' (to change for the better) is an example to remind, and 'killing two birds with one stone' (getting two results from one effort) is an example to praise.

A simile is an expression making an imaginative comparison between two things; for example, describing a woman's skin 'as white as snow', a person running 'as fast as lightning' and a hungry man 'eating like a horse'. A metaphor also makes an imaginative comparison between two things but without the words 'like' or 'as'. Some examples are 'the light shines in her eyes' and 'this town is a concrete jungle'.

Colloquial are informal phrases which are widely used in everyday conversations. These, however, are not accepted in formal written language. Phrases like 'he got all mixed up' (he was very confused), 'I don't really fancy basketball' (I don't really like basketball) and 'she looks real down' (she looks very sad) can only be used colloquially. Other types of colloquials include a 'square' for a narrow-minded person and a 'nut-case' for a crazy person.

These linguistic items pose problems to non-native speakers of English because they need to know more about the language and its background in order to understand them. Merely knowing the meanings of individual English words does not guarantee the complete understanding of the English idiomatic expressions. More often than not, the inability to understand these expressions is perhaps the most frustrating part for the students of English as a second language. Setzler (1981) has also stated the difficulty of idiomatic expressions to non-native speakers of English because 'direct translations often proven nonsensical and misleading. However, mastery of the most commonly used idiomatic expressions is essential for natural everyday conversation'.

Idiomatic expressions are often a source of problems because they represent the uniqueness of a particular language and they reflect the culture of the society in which the language is spoken. In order to understand this uniqueness and to be able to use the language effectively in a conversation, a learner has to know the culture and the origin of the target language because 'language and culture are inexorably intertwined' (Gladstone, 1969:14) and 'it is evident that language is a vital constituent of culture' (Trivedi, 1978:92). Malinowski (1953) also supports this view when he says that 'language is not something which can be studied independently of cultural reality'.

Since each culture has a unique pattern and unique behaviour of individuals, second language learning will mean changing the learner's behaviour and injecting a new way of life and new values of life into his already settled behaviour pattern. When the term 'equivalents' is used in second language teaching or learning, the difficult problem of setting up semantic equivalents in the matrix of the target-language culture arises. Thus, it is not often possible to translate English expressions, especially idiomatic expressions, to get the equivalents in the mother tongue.

Most students of English as a second language learn the meaning of idiomatic expressions by rote learning i.e. memorising. Idiomatic expressions form the most 'foreign' aspect of learning the language and they find difficulty in using them. Merely knowing the meanings of the idiomatic expressions is far from mastering the language. Studies have shown that learning to use idiomatic expressions

correctly in the proper context of situation is more effective than rote learning.

The theory of context of situation originated from Malinowski (1935) when he studied the language of the Trobrianders, a tribe in New Guinea, where he was engaged in an anthropological field work. Malinowski's major task, linguistically, was to find adequate English equivalents or translations of native words and expressions in certain types of social context and this he found could only be done by extensive contextual analysis of the key words and phrases. According to Malinowski, an utterance has no meaning except in the context of situation.

Hayakawa (1952) also discusses the importance of context in understanding words which are perfectly defined in dictionaries. In everyday communication, contexts often indicate the meaning so clearly that it is unnecessary to say what one means in order to be understood. One of the dangers of ignoring context is that one can easily be misunderstood; for instance, ignoring psychological context can turn a jest into an insult.

Francois Gouin's experience (Diller, 1978) is a classic example illustrating the importance of the context of situation in second language learning. Gouin went to Hamburg and attempted to learn German by memorising a German grammar book. In testing his self-acquired knowledge, he discovered that he could not participate in conversations among the native speakers because he could not understand them. He could not distinguish the grammatical forms that he had learnt nor the different types of verbs he had memorised. He tried harder but his efforts proved futile when he could not converse with the Germans.

Diller concluded that Gouin's failure was due to the fact that he treated German as a dead language. Gouin did not learn and practise the language in the proper context of situation, particularly in everyday life situations, nor did he get the proper response or feedback in natural situations. Gouin ignored the idiomaticity of the target language.

The process of learning a second language requires a background knowledge of the target language and constant practice using the language within context. Thus, learning extensive vocabulary and mastering various grammatical structures do not guarantee mastering of the English language. The ability to understand and use English idiomatic expressions will ensure effective communication with the language.

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