ENGLISH IDIOMS: A REVIEW OF RECOGNITION CRITERIA.

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In this paper David Jowitt attempts to review the characteristics by which an idiom may be recognised. After exploring the various ways in which the term 'idiom' has been used by scholars and in dictionaries, he observes that the set of properties often used to define the idiom are insufficient. However drawing inspiration from the various terms, descriptions and classification of previous works, Jowitt goes on to list four necessary properties of idioms. These should form the basis for the compilation of a new dictionary of idioms, including particularly the dictionary that would meet the special needs of teachers and learners of English in Nigeria.

1.   Idioms are an area of vocabulary with a special appeal for learners of English as a second language. Rightly or wrongly, such learners believe that the ability to use idioms often and accurately is one of the hallmarks of good usage.   Teachers and policy makers seem to confirm this sense of their importance: thus in the 'Vocabulary Development' component of the official English Language syllabus for Nigeria's senior secondary schools we find one of the nine sections devoted to 'Idioms and idiomatic expressions and accepted Nigerian idioms in current English usage'. The general popularity of idioms can be measured by the special dictionaries that have appeared over the years, the most notable recent examples being those edited by Long and Summers (1979), Cowie, Mackin and McCaig (1975,1983), and Gulland and Hinds-Howell (1986).   In ELT there has been fresh interest in the teaching of vocabulary after an earlier period of neglect, as noted by Carter and McCarthy (1988), and this naturally stimulates renewed interest in idioms. By the same token, idioms in New English usage are beginning to attract attention. Their use in Nigerian newspapers, for example, has been surveyed by Igbani (1986).

2.   Despite the frequency with which the term 'idioms' is used in teaching and learning, the set of expressions which the term denotes has never been precisely defined, and perhaps it cannot be. This does not, of course, mean that there may not be fairly general agreement within a wide group of people - linguists, for example, or teachers of English - as to whether a given expression 'counts as' an idiom, or is a 'prototypical' idiom as one which users of English would be highly likely to cite if asked to do so. It can safely be said that such groups would consider *pull someone,s leg* to be an idiom and *cross one's legs* not to be an idiom. But they might have some doubts about *a vicious circle*, or *on the whole* (both of which feature in Long and Summers), or about phrasal verbs, which constitute so large a class of their own that they receive special attention from lexicographers. In some broader sense, it would no doubt be agreed, these too are idioms; and it is with this broader sense in mind that, as the title of their work indicates, Cowie *et al.* survey 'idiomatic English' as a whole, with the 'idioms that appear in the other dictionaries mentioned forming only a subset of their collection.

3.   On the assumption that linguists and language teachers will continue to talk of a class of 'idioms' in the narrower sense, I seek in this paper to review the characteristics by which an idiom may be recognised. This prompts, without delay, some exploration of the ways in which the term 'idiom' and its derivatives have hitherto been used. We may first note that the word *idiom* is polysemous, since it can be either a countable or an uncountable noun - $idiom_c$ and $idiom_u$ - and there is actually more than one sense in either category. The main distinction was recognised by Fowler;

> In this book, 'an idiom' is any form of expression that has established itself as the particular way preferred by Englishmen (and therefore presumably characteristic of them) over other forms...
>
> *'Idioms' is the sum total of such forms of expression, and is consequently the same as natural or racy or unaffected English.*

But as a definition of 'an idiom' in the sense that concerns us, Fowler's formula is unsatisfactory. He appears to ignore a vital property which was labelled 'opacity' by Ullmann (1962) and will receive more attention below. In a definition of 'idiom' given in a contemporary dictionary of linguistic terms it is referred to (after 'and') thus:

> IDIOM: an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts.

although this in turn makes no mention of the property which Fowler does describe and which can be paraphrased as 'having a form and meaning determined by usage'. The two properties are brought together by the *Concise Oxford's* definition:

> IDIOM:....peculiarity of phraseology approved by usage though having meaning not deducable from those of the separate words.

Todd and Hancock (1986), who provide for both the countable and uncountable senses with separate entries for IDIOM and IDIOMS, again omit mention of usage in their definition of 'idioms', which are 'phrases whose meaning cannot be deduced from an understanding of the individual words in the phrases'. They also make specific reference to 'phrases', which they implicitly and conventionally define as groups of two or more words. This seems reasonable, especially when we seek to restrict the definiton of 'idiom' as much as possible; yet there are words of certain categories, e.g metonyms, which are listed in some dictionaries of idioms and display all the other properties of idioms that we identify. (See below.)

If *idiom* has so often been incompletely defined, the adjective *idiomatic* is inherently ambiguous. Adjectives in English are not marked for countability, with the result that *idiomatic* may mean "characteristic of usage", i.e corresponding to $idiom_u$, or it may mean "pertaining to idioms", i.e corresponding to $idiom_c$. Thus when Fowler goes on to say that 'that is idiomatic which it is natural for a normal Englishman to say or write', he implies an underlying $idiom_u$: but in the following passage from Long and Summers it is $Idiom_c$ that is implied:

> *The man gave up the ghost* = the man died, but a substitution, such as the man gave up the apparition or the man released the ghost, tends to make the phrase literal and the idiomatic meaning is lost.

Ambiguity easily arises because the sense of $idiom_c$ is included in that of $idiom_u$. Here is perhaps a suitable moment, then, to propose the introduction of a new coinage, *idiomic*. This would mean "pertaining to idioms", and would correspond exclusively to $idiom_c$, leaving *idiomatic* to correspond exclusively to $idiom_u$.

Summarising so far, we find that three necessary properties to be mentioned in the definition of 'a (prototypical) idiom' are:

(a)   an idiom is a phrase, i.e consists of more than one word;
(b)   the form and meaning of an idiom are established by usage;
(c)   the meaning of an idiom is opaque, i.e is not deducible from the meaning of the constituent words.

4.   This is not yet a sufficient set of properties, however. Not only are the form and the meaning of an idiom established by usage, but usage has made this form and this meaning to a great extent 'fixed' or 'petrified', so that for example *pull someone's leg* cannot be pluralised to *pull someone's legs* (though *They were pulling our legs* is acceptable if the sense is 'distributive', i.e. one leg for each person)[1]. But in this respect idioms belong to a much wider class of what Carter (1987), following Alexander (1978), terms 'fixed expressions'. These are subsumed in the even wider class of 'collocations'.

which make up the Cowie *et al.* corpus of 'idiomatic English' expressions. Some examination is needed of each of these terms. A collocation, again in the words of Carter, is 'a term used to describe a group of words which occur [*sic* - 'co-occur' is surely meant] repeatedly in a language'. It has been used in two broad senses, 'paradigmatic' and 'syntagmatic'. The first refers to the likelihood of the co-occurrence in a text of words that belong to the same semantic field or lexical set. In the second sense, the one that concerns us, words co-occur within the same phrase and are normally juxtaposed (becoming separated by insertions, or by transformations). Usage makes this co-occurrence acceptable, and also makes it predictable. There are however degrees of predictability, and it is those collocations with a high degree of predictability which are said to be 'fixed'. Fixity is nevertheless itself a matter of degree: for example, some fixed expressions permit some lexical variation (e.g. *a close shave/a close call*), and while in general it may be said that they resist certain syntactic operations - as noted by Chafe (1968) and Fraser (1970) in the case of idioms - there are many exceptions. Thus although idioms cannot normally be passivised we find *She was cut to the quick by his words* as well as *His words cut her to the quick* (examples from Long and Summers). As the examples just discussed illustrate, fixity may be a question of either lexical invariance or grammatical invariance.

Carter develops a seven-part typology to account for the obvious considerable variety of types of fixed expressions. 'Idioms', the first division, he sub-divides into (i) 'irreversible binomials', such as *kith and kin, spick and span;* (ii) 'full idioms', such as *rain cats and dogs;* and (iii) 'semi-idioms', such as *beefy-looking* and *a fat salary*. Divisions II-VII are designated 'Proverbs', 'Stock phrases' (e.g.*When all is said and done...*), 'Catchphrases' (e.g. *You must be joking*), 'Allusions/quotations', 'Idiomatic similes' (e.g.*as old as the hills*), and 'Discoursal expressions' respectively, the last being a mixed bag containing 'social formulae' (e.g.*How do you do?*), 'connectives' (e.g. *Once upon a time...*), and so on. In this way various groups of expressions that have received attention in recent years are provided for. At the same time Carter wishes to try to characterise fixed expressions in general, and for this purpose he suggests that they can be ranged along 'clines of lexical relations'. The degree of fixity, or fixedness of an expression is to be seen as a product of the interaction of three clines, namely: collocational restriction, syntactic structure, and semantic opacity. Thus *fat chance* in *Fat chance you've got* would be said to have a high degree of fixity because it is 'relatively closed' collocationally, syntactically, and semantically; while a stylistic formula such as *Further to my letter of...* is collocationally restricted and syntactically uncommutable, but semantically transparent.

5. This use of three interacting clines invites certain criticisms. One is that although morphology is sometimes regarded as a mere department of syntax, syntactic uncommutability and morphological invariance are different things. (On both counts *kith and kin* remain highly fixed, though in Nigeria the two nouns, like uncountable nouns in general, are often pluralised). Then the notion of 'collocational restriction' is not wholly clear as between what may be called 'context-free' and 'context-sensitive'/interpretations. *Kith and kin* shows a high degree of context-free restrictedness, because, as noted above, the first noun is never used without the second following it and the second rarely today without the first preceding it. On the other hand, *fat chance* can only be said to have a high degree of restrictedness because of the special ironical meaning that *fat* has when collocated with *chance;* otherwise it is unrestricted, since each constituent can collocate with numerous other words.

A further objection is that a cline of opacity differs radically in kind from the other two clines. Their fixedness is a question of form; opacity on the other hand is a function or product of meaning, which itself can be described as a function of the form of words, singly or in combination. This characterisation of opacity remains valid even when we take into account current insights into the distinction between invariant 'word/sentence meaning', and variable 'speaker meaning'/'utterance meaning'(Hurford & Heasley 1983), which in context of applied linguistics translates into the hypothesis that meaning is not static but is 'negotiated' from one context to another. 'Opacity is nevertheless a term that has been used in several senses. One sense, which could be termed 'inherent' or 'objective', is found when philosophers speak of 'opaque contexts', describing for example a sentence frame into which the insertion of different referring expressions could produce different truth values even when these expressions have the same referent. There is also 'subjective' opacity, which is a source of interest to psycholinguists and arises when the language 'receiver' has difficulty in 'processing'/sentences as a result of syntactic factors such as density of clauses, embeddings, and so on. It is the kind of opacity that confronts readers of the fiction of Henry James or Proust, or certain legal documents. A further kind of opacity perhaps is perhaps even more familiar, namely the use of figurative language. The literal meaning of a word or a group of words may be transparent, but when used figuratively it becomes opaque; the context will normally indicate whether the meaning is to be taken literally or figuratively. This is of course an important feature of poetry, and poetry such as that of Hopkins or Eliot or Soyinka is so packed with figures, or tropes, that truly the reader cannot 'see' the meaning. Here, then, we have 'figurative opacity'.

We shall return to this subject of figurative opacity shortly, but for now the main point is that it does not make sense to regard opacity as a factor

of fixedness. To take one example, it makes sense to say that *kith and kin* is highly fixed, because it is collocationally restricted and syntactically uncommutable; on a cline of opacity it is transparent, provided we know the meaning of the constituent words, but this does not make it any less fixed. To take another, contrasting example, *spill the beans* - a prototypical idiom - shows a high, though not the highest degree of syntactic invariance; like many idioms it has the form V + NP, and although the verb cannot be passivised it can be varied for tense. At the same time, this idom has a high degree of opacity. In general, then, fixed expressions, including idioms, can be said to occupy quite uncorrelated positions on two different clines. Only one of these is relevant to a classification and comparison of fixed expressions as fixed expressions. It could be termed a 'cline of invariance', and would be the product of factorial clines of lexical invariance (partly equivalent to Carter's cline of collocational restriction) and grammatical (i.e. syntactic and morphological) invariance.

6.1   It is easy to think of numerous 'prototypical' idioms which possess the property of figurative opacity: *a red herring, make someone's blood boil, breathe down someone's neck, stew in one's own juice, turn one's nose up, at loggerheads, the night of the long knives, sour grapes.* This is a list selected from the Long and Summers collection, which does not include phrasal verbs although many of them are also opaque and so 'idiomic' (e.g. *take after* - but not *move back*). As fixed expressions they occupy different positions on the cline of invariance; as idioms they likewise occupy different positions on a cline of opacity. Thus at one extreme, the lower end of the cline, we find a large sub-class of prepositional phrases which are almost transparent and only weakly figurative - *at length, at once, in vain, on time, on the whole,* etc; and their low degree of opacity would justify a feeling we might have that they are barely to be regarded as idioms at all. It is arguable, moreover, that such opacity as they possess is due less to figurativeness than to the polysemity (and therefore high degree of collocability) of the commonest prepositions: *at, in,* and *on.* There are other such phrases which have a greater figurative content since it is now clearly the complement of the preposition which is used figuratively - *at hand, by heart, on tenterhooks,* etc; they arguably show a higher degree of opacity. At the other extreme, the higher end of the cline, we would find, to take one example, *a red herring.* This is a common, colloquial idiom, in Britain at any rate, defined by Long and Summers as "a suggestion, piece of information, etc, introduced into a situation in order to draw someone's attention away from the truth or more important part of the situation". An ordinary dictionary informs us, if we do not already know, that a herring is a fish found in the North Atlantic (which may appear on Nigerian market counters along with mackerel as a form of 'iced fish'). We are then

directed to the register of hunting, specifically of hunting with hounds, which in Britain is a socially exclusive pursuit, almost as remote from most people's daily experience as it is in Nigeria and learn that a herring reddened by being cured in smoke gives off a strong smell which can confuse the hounds. A lexical item more opaque is hard to imagine[2].

6.2   The degree of opacity of idioms is to some extent determined by the kind of figure used. It seems that certain kinds are inherently more opaque - or more transparent - than others. Thus simile is more transparent than metaphor because the essence of a simile is an explicit comparison. Then of two basic figures recognised by contemporary literary theory (e.g. that of Jakobson), metonymy is again more transparent than metaphor because of the 'contiguous' or 'sequential' principle underlying it. Thus *Whitehall* is easy to understand as meaning "the British government", at least in Britain itself where it is generally known that some of the important government offices are found in a street called Whitehall. In Nigeria, likewise, the ultimate source of authority under military regimes used to be referred to metonymically as *Dodan Barracks:* with the shift of the capital to Abuja this has now been replaced by *Aso Rock.* We may of course not wish to count these metonyms as idioms, certainly not as prototypical idioms, since they are often not phrases and their opacity is not conditioned by the juxtaposition of individual words.

6.3   The opacity of prototypical idioms is to some extent offset by the familiarity of the images they present, referring as so many of them do to the most basic actions, to common objects, and to parts of the body. Thus in the Long and Summers collection of over 4,500 idioms, more than 300 refer to just four parts of the body - the hand(s), the eye(s), the heart, and the head; altogether about 800, or nearly one-fifth of the total, refer to parts of the body. How these idioms and in general 'the metaphors we live by' achieve their semantic effects has been described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and by Lakoff and Kovecses (1987). They point out that when such an idiom is used an analogy is established between a physical state drawn from everyday experience, which is the 'source' supplying the figure, and an abstract state which is the 'target' of use, i.e. the state of affairs the language user seeks to charaterise. Thus in their analysis of 'the cognitive model of anger' Lakoff and Kovecses list a number of idioms or idiomatic expressions that are based on such metaphors as ANGER=HEAT, ANGER=FIRE, ANGER=A DANGEROUS ANIMAL, and so on. Sometimes several metaphors are presupposed at once; thus *make someone's blood boil* presupposes ANGER=HEAT, but also HUMAN BODY=A (HEATABLE) container and BLOOD=A (HEATABLE) LIQUID. It is plausible to say that the greater the number of metaphors that are presupposed, the greater the opacity of the idiom. In addition, however, as in this example, the dominant image subtended

by the metaphors may be so strange, indeed so paradoxically remote from everyday experience, that the idiom jars with its context and draws attention to itself with a kind of dramatic force, having the effect on the reader of sudden defamiliarisation. This, as the Russian formalists noted, is a general characteristic of poetic language. To say so by no means necessarily adds any lustre to idioms; for the metaphors they embody rapidly come to seem stale, very many idioms are therefore clichés, and the great majority of those in the Long and Summers' collection are marked as 'colloquial' or 'not formal'.

7.   The conclusion we have reached is that within a large class of idiomatic, fixed expressions there is definable a narrower class of 'idioms', whose salient property is that of figurative opacity. This emphasis on figurative opacity would put a question mark, at least, over the idiomic status of a number of fixed expressions included in some dictionaries of idioms, such as *all but, for instance, and on the whole* (from Long and Summers); and it would justify some rearrangement of Carter's typology. Thus it would seem logical to include in 'Idioms', his first division, 'full idioms' (for example, all the prototypical idioms cited above), 'idiomatic similes', and 'proverbs' (which, like phrasal verbs, deserve and have received special attention). Carter's 'semi-idioms' would for obvious reasons have a marginal status that helps to render the defining line between idioms and other fixed expressions fuzzy. All his other groups, including irreversible binomials, would then be regarded as fixed but not idiomic. This may seem controversial, especially where irreversible binomials are concerned; yet these expressions are clearly distinguishable from idioms in not possessing figurative opacity.

The set of necessary properties of idioms can now finally be summarised as follows:

(a)   an idiom is a phrase;
(b)   the form and meaning of an idiom are established by usage;
(c)   the form and meaning of an idiom are fixed;
(d)   the meaning of an idiom is more or less opaque.

On this basis a new dictionary of idioms could be compiled, somewhat slimmer than the existing ones. It is perhaps also time for one to be compelled to meet the special needs of teachers and learners in Nigeria, one that might include not only established Nigerian variants of existing idioms but also ones that are peculiar to Nigerian English.

Notes

1.   The 'invariance' of idioms does not imply that as a result of usage the form of an idiom may not vary somewhat from one national variety of English to another. Thus in Nigeria *cut one's coat/cloth according to one's size* is often heard instead of the 'Standard', and British English, *cut one's coat according to one's cloth*. It is debatable whether this should be regarded as 'wrong', although the point of the idiom is that you should remain within the limits of what you can afford; this is more clearly brought out by the British variant, since the cloth you have been able to afford determines the kind of coat you can have made!

2.   This discussion of *red herring* raises the question whether the idioms that feature in 'Standard' dictionaries should be taught indiscriminately in Nigeria, though this is too complex an issue to be discussed here.

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