THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE IDIOMS AND DEGREES OF OPACITY

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A B S T R A C T	**K E Y W O R D S**
This article gives information about the process of "idiomaticization" lies in diachronic evolution, idiomaticity cannot be adequately explained by the generative rules. Neither a given sense or a given syntactic structure by itself constitutes an idiom. Rather it is the regular association of one with the other that is the source of idiomaticity	Authentic material, ESL classroom, context, teachable moment

Introduction

Where there is metaphorical use of the kind referred to above, the phrase in question may undergo the well-known processes of semantic extension, specialization, etc .which operate in many shifts of meaning. The resulting phrase may become an idiom, with no obvious link with its literal predecessor (which of course in most cases still exists independently). There has also probably been a move from the 'concrete' vocabulary of the literal expression to more 'abstract' meaning. That the concrete and tangible, often in conjunction with an action verb, becomes the abstract and intangible has long been observed in relation to proverbs as well. This is especially relevant since many proverbs have claims to be considered idioms. At any particular moment, therefore, synchronically there are literal phrases, metaphors which are clearly connected with the literal, other more opaque but possible interpretable phrases, and opaque idioms. To take an explanatory example, in the second category there probably comes a phrase such as skate on thin ice meaning 'to court danger'. There, the jump in the metaphorical transfer from the literal to the figurative is sufficiently small for the link between the two readings to be easily discernible. The future meaning of the phase is of course unknowable, but various hypotheses can be made in an attempt to show the processes involved. In the dim and distant future, in a temperate climate, ice, and a memory of it, might totally disappear. In this case skate on thin ice in its idiomatic meaning would be unmotivated and the link between literal and metaphorical broken so that it would be unmotivated and the link between literal and metaphorical broken so that it would now be legitimate to class the phase in the third, semi-opaque, category. Similarly, if for some reason people should give up skating, the phase could simply change its meaning: 'to court danger' could become 'to court danger ostentatiously', then 'to be a show-off which eventually could be used in a wide range of contexts in

on way tied to the collocational range of the present skate on thin ice: The greatest defect of his character was to skate on thin ice in public. He has a desperate need for love and recognition'.

All this is purely speculative. Idioms which are already in the third and fourth categories show verifiable evidence of similar changes in their etymologies. An extreme case in point is the phase to pull someone's leg. This expression is believed to come from the old practice of pulling the legs of a man in the process of being hanged, to speed his death and so spare his agony. By a long process of semantic change this same phrase now means 'to make gentle fun of'. Quite clearly there is no link between the two expressions synchronically. The idiom is totally opaque. Similarly, proverbs and nursery rhymes can be equally removed from their origins. Ring-a-ring-a-roses, for example, comes from the deaths caused by the Plague, yet is today a children's nursery rhyme. Although a historical explanation of idioms is illuminating in showing the forces at work and in demonstrating why certain idioms are in fact opaque or transparent, the decision as to which category an idioms an idiom is to be ascribed to must be taken on the basis of synchronic, not diachronic, evidence. Primary is the present-day status of an idiom; diachronic considerations provide useful secondary corroboratory evidence.

Weinreich totally rejects any attempt to study the meaning relations between literal and idiomatic expressions. To him each case must be an individual historical study and the semantic motivation is something that can only established a posteriori. He concludes:

I feel that the relation between idiomatic and literal meanings is so unsystematic as to deserve no place in the theory.

The usefulness of attempting to make an assessment of the strength of the link between literal and figurative meaning is that the expressions which cluster at the opaque end of the scale can be called 'pure idioms'. In their case the figurative link between literal and idiomatic is broken. In the case of phrases at the transparent end of the spectrum, the metaphor is clearly perceived and still alive and kicking. In these cases it is fairly easy to deduce the 'idiomatic' meaning from the literal constituents. It has long been recognized that the expressions such as to pull someone's leg, cook someone's goose, round the bend, up the creek are semantically peculiar. They are usually described as "idioms". Traditional definition of idioms runs roughly as follows: an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meanings of its parts. Although at first sight straightforward, there is curious element of circularity in this definition. Does it indicate that the meaning of an idiom cannot be inferred from (or, more precisely, cannot be accounted for as compositional function of) the meanings the parts carry in that expression? Clearly not – so it must be matter of their meanings in other expressions. But equally clearly, these "other expressions" must be chosen with care: in considering to pull someone's leg, for instance, there is a little point in referring **to pull** in **to pull as fast one**, or **leg in He has not a leg to stand on**. The definition must be understood as stating that an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be accounted for as compositional function of the meanings its parts have when they are not parts of idioms. The circulatory is now plain: to apply the definition, we must already be in a position to distinguish idiomatic from non-idiomatic expression.

A semantically non-transparent expression may be described as semantically opaque. It is important to emphasize that,   as we have define it, transparency is the end-point of a continuum of degrees of opacity, much as cleanness is the end point of a continuum of "degrees of dirtiness". We have located the decisive break in semantic character between "fully transparent" and "to some degree opaque" rather than between "completely opaque" and "not completely opaque", as this groups together more satisfactorily elements with significantly similar properties. The idea of semi-opaque expressions is

already implicit in the notion introduced earlier of "semantic indicator": a semi-opaque expressions most contain at least one semantic indicator. We must now be somewhat more precise concerning the concept of "degree of opacity". There would seem to be two components to this notion. The first is the extent to which constituents of opaque expressions are full semantic indicators: clearly blackbird, with two full indicators, is less opaque than ladybird with one partial indicator only bird which in turn is less opaque than red herring or in a brown study, neither of which contains any indicator at all. The other factor affecting degree of opacity is the discrepancy between the combined contribution of the indicators, whether full or partial and the overall meaning of the idioms.

It is also difficult to measure such a discrepancy objectively, but it does seem that, for instance, some of so called "**irreversible binomials**" such as fish and chips are less opaque than say blackbird, even though both contain only full semantic indicators. It may even come as a surprise to some to learn tha fish and chips is opaque at all. But one needs only to consider that not any kind of fish, nor any methods of cooking and presentations, will qualify for the description, and that this is not true of, say, chips and fish or even fish with chips, both of which are transparent.

It is probable that fish and chips is ambiguous with one opaque and one transparent reading, the two being optionally distinguishable in pronunciation:

Chips and fish on the other hand is not ambiguous, and does not have the two pronunciation option.

As degree of opacity diminishes we approach the somewhat indeterminate transitional zone between opacity and transparency: indeed, some of the irreversible binominals are hard to categorize as one or the other: salt and vinegar (in chip-shop parlance), soap and water ,etc. in principle all opaque sequences are minimal lexical units and therefore should be listed separately in an ideal dictionary. A practical lexicographer, however, would probably draw his line in a different place of ours: he might well argue that phrases such as fish and chips etc. while undoubtedly slight opaque in the technical sense present few problems of interpretation to speakers familiar with the normal constituent meanings of the parts and are thus not worth listing.

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