

## ENGLISH IDIOMS: DIFFICULTIES OF THEIR USAGE

English is very rich in idiomatic expressions. In fact, it is difficult to speak or write English without using idioms. An English native speaker is very often not aware that he is using an idiom, he uses it spontaneously. Perhaps he doesn't even realize that the idiom which he uses is sometimes grammatically incorrect. A non-native learner makes the correct use of idiomatic English one of his main aims, and the fact that some idioms are illogical or grammatically incorrect causes him difficulty. Only careful study and exact learning will help.

Idioms are not only colloquial expressions, as many people believe. They can appear in formal style and in slang. Some of them, regarded as slang, may become colloquialisms used by educated people and still later may become established literary norms. They can appear in poetry or in the language of Shakespeare and the Bible. Today they have become a universal and essential element in spoken and written English, a linguistic unit the use of which enriches the language. Their extremely wide usage is the reason why the learners of English are always eager to have a good knowledge of idiomatic English.

Most, but not all idiomatic expressions are phrases of two or more words, the most important thing about them being the meaning. Because idioms are metaphorical usages, one cannot usually discover their meaning by looking up the individual words in an ordinary dictionary. Because they are more or less invariable, both in wording and in certain grammatical ways, they cannot be changed or varied in the way literal expressions are normally varied, whether in speech or writing. Although metaphoricality and invariability characterize the idioms, these are very broad and general characteristics. Idioms vary a great deal in how metaphorical or invariable they are. In other words, idiomaticity (the quality of being idiomatic) is a matter of degree or scale. The metaphorical meaning of some idioms is easier to understand or imagine when one knows how it has developed, its source or origin. This is the reason why, when possible, historical explanations of idioms are given in the dictionaries.

For example, the idiom *the salt of the earth* which indicates people with very high qualities, someone who is very dependable, honest etc, was originally used in the Bible. It's evident that it belongs to the times when people first discovered that salt added an exceptional taste not only to foods but to human life as well. The Bible gives as also *to kill the fatted calf* (receive with joy), *the apple of one's eye* (somebody or something dearly loved).

In many cases, however, it is not possible to explain exactly the connection between the literal words of an idiom and the metaphorical meaning that it has developed. An example is *a fine (pretty) kettle of fish*. No exact

connection between a kettle filled with fish and the idiomatic meaning which denotes a state of confusion.

The idiom *to buy a pig in a poke* means to buy something without seeing it or knowing its value, something, which one has not inspected previously and which is worth less than one paid for it. The word *poke* is an old word meaning sack. It exceptionally appears in present-day English with this meaning in the above idiom. Therefore, the idiom has continued to be used long after the individual word has disappeared.

Many idiomatic phrases come from the everyday life of Englishmen, from home life. For example, *to make a clean sweep of something* (to get rid of what is completely unwanted) or *to hit the nail on the head* (pick out the real part at issue, give the true explanation). There are many idioms which have to do with food and cooking: *out of the frying-pan into the fire* (from a bad situation to one that is worse), *to be in the soup* (to be in trouble). Agricultural life has given rise to *to go to seed* (become careless of one's appearance and clothes), *to put one's hand to the plough* (to undertake a task). Nautical and military life are the source of *when one's ship comes home* (when one has made his fortune), *to be in the same boat* (to have the same dangers), *to sail under false colours* (to use a flag which one has no right to use). Many idioms include parts of the body, animals, and colors.

Idioms take many different forms or structures. They can be very short or rather long. A large number of idioms consist of some combinations of noun and adjective, e.g. *a dark horse* (one whose chances of success are not yet known, a surprise candidate), *forty winks* (a short sleep especially during the day), *a snake in the grass* (treacherous person who pretends to be a friend). Some idioms are much longer: *to fish in troubled waters* (try to win advantage for oneself from a disturbed state of affairs), *to take the bull by the horns* (meet a difficulty boldly, instead of trying to escape from it).

An idiom can have a regular structure, an irregular or even a grammatically incorrect structure. The idiom *I am a good friends with him* is irregular or illogical in its grammatical structure. A native speaker is not consciously aware of this inconsistency. This is, therefore, an example of the kind of idiom where the form is irregular but the meaning is clear.

A second kind has a regular form but the meaning is not clear. *To have a bee in one's bonnet* (to be obsessed by an idea) has a regular form, but its meaning is not obvious. There is a third group, in which both form and meaning are irregular: *to be at large*. The form Verb + Preposition + Adjective without a noun is strange, and we have no idea what it means. If we talk about a prisoner who is still at large, it means that he is still free. Other examples of this kind are: *to go through thick and thin* (in any condition, good or bad), *to be at daggers drawn* (to be about to fight with somebody), *to be in the swim* (to be aware of what is going on).

It is known that most idioms belong to the second group, where the form is regular, but the meaning is unclear. However, in this group some idioms are easier to guess than others. In the example *to give someone the green light* we can guess the meaning even though we may have never heard it before. If we associate the green light with traffic lights where green means "Go!", we can imagine that the idiom means to give someone permission to start something.

Other idioms can be guessed if we hear them in context, that is, when we know how they are used in particular situation. As an example we can take the following example *to be at the top of the tree*. If we hear the sentence *John is at the top of the tree now*, we can think that perhaps John is hiding, but if we hear the phrase in context, the meaning becomes obvious: *Ten years ago John joined the company and now he's the general manager! Yes, he's really at the top of the tree!* Thus, the idiom means to be at the top of one's profession, to be successful.

Some idioms are too difficult to guess correctly because they have no association with the original meaning of the individual words. Here are some examples: *to tell someone where to get off*, *to bring the house down*, *to take it out on someone*. The learner will have great difficulty here unless he has heard the idioms before. Even when they are used in context, it is not easy to detect the meaning exactly. The literal meaning of the combination of words *to get off* usually appears together with a bus or a bicycle. But in its idiomatic sense *to tell someone where to get off* means to tell someone rudely and openly what you think of him as in this context: *Jane had had enough of Mary's stupid and critical remarks, so she finally told her where to get off*. For a foreign learner, this idiomatic meaning is not even exactly clear in context.

It was adopted earlier that we have to learn an idiom as a whole because we often cannot change any part of it, but the fact is that the idioms are fixed in some of their parts but not in others. Some idioms allow only limited changes in the parts which are not fixed. For example the idiom *to give someone the cold shoulder* which means *to treat someone in a cold or unfriendly way*. Of course, it is not possible to say *to give someone the cool or warm shoulder* or *to give a cold shoulder to someone*. None of these are possible, and the foreign learner not knowing this should note the alternative possibilities and use only these and no others. *To give someone the cold shoulder* is therefore a fixed idiom. Here is another example: *to make a clear breast of it*, which means to tell the truth about something. We can only change the tense of the verb. The idiom *to take/have/enjoy forty winks* allows a limited choice of verb but the pair *forty winks* is fixed. We cannot say *fifty winks*. We cannot explain why this is wrong. We must accept the idiomatic peculiarities of the language and learn to handle them. Some more examples of idioms which are not fixed in all parts are *to come to a bad/nasty/sticky/no good/untimely end*, *to keep a sharp/careful/watchful/professional eye on someone*.

One of the main difficulties in using an idiom is that we do not know in which situation it is correct, that is, if the idiom is natural or appropriate in a certain situation. We do not know the level of style, that is, whether an idiom can be used in a formal or in an informal situation. Choice of words depends on the person one is speaking to and on the situation or place at the time. If the person is a friend and the situation is private, we may use informal or even slang expressions. In a formal situation, when we don't know the person we are speaking to very well or we are in public, we choose words much more carefully. It would be wrong to choose an informal expression in some rather formal situations and it would be bad manners to choose a slang expression. This means that we can express the same information or idea in more than one way using a different level.

Above all it is usually extremely unwise to translate idioms into English from one's own native language. One may be lucky that the two languages have the same form and vocabulary, but in most cases, the result will be utterly bewildering to the native speaker and possibly highly amusing.

Thus, the correct use of idiomatic English should be the aim of every learner. It is an aim which is worthwhile and satisfying. Mastery of idioms comes only slowly, through careful study and observation, through practice and experience.

## References:

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