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Idiomat�icity

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The terms *idiom(at�icity)* has two distinct meanings. In linguistic theory, *idiom* is reserved for phrases that behave like single words in some respects and like assembled phrases in others. On the one hand, idioms are not just phrasal lexemes because they can be modified both lexically and syntactically. The idiom *walk a tightrope* (“to act very carefully so that you avoid either of two opposite bad situations”) is an example in question: an adjective like *legal* can be inserted before the noun (*to walk a legal tightrope*). On the other hand, idioms do not license the full range of syntactic operations as regular phrases do. (2) and (3) provide examples of idioms that do not allow tense shifting and rephrasing in passive voice, respectively.

- (2) a. It takes one to know one.
b. *It took one to know one.
- (3) a. He shot the breeze.
b. *The breeze was shot (by him).

Given the highly idiosyncratic nature of idioms, they are best defined as a class of phrases that

exhibit a range of features to different degrees. Nunberg *et al.* (1994: 492–93) list the following features, with conventionality as the only necessary condition for idiom status:

conventionality: the meaning or use of an idiom cannot be predicted (in full) on the basis of “knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another” (Nunberg *et al.*, 1994: 492)

formal inflexibility: idioms are syntactically restricted

figuration: idioms have a non-literal, or figurative, meaning

proverbiality: idioms often describe a more abstract activity in terms of a more concrete activity (consider *climb the wall*, *spill the beans*, or *break the ice*)

informality: idioms tend to be associated with colloquial speech or register

affect: idioms typically entail an evaluative or affective stance

Idioms pose a significant problem for theories of language in which syntax and lexis are strictly separate components. Accordingly, in early generative approaches, idioms were mostly discarded as anomalies (Fraser, 1970). More recent frameworks, on the contrary, attribute idioms a more central role by discarding of a binary distinction between syntax and the lexicon, thereby eliminating the need to draw a sharp distinction between idioms and regular phrases, and instead viewing both as symbolic units which differ with regard to their overall idiomat�icity.

In Construction Grammar, for instance, idioms are stored alongside morphemes, words, and abstract grammatical frames in an extended mental lexicon (Goldberg, 2006). Table 8 provides a schematic representation.

Phraseological definitions of idioms and idiomat�icity

Idioms have also received considerable attention in the field of phraseology (that is, the study of multi-word units). In phraseological models, idioms are

Table 8 A schematic representation of the constructicon (adapted from Goldberg, 2006: 5).

<i>morpheme</i>	<i>pre-, -ing</i>
word	<i>avocado, anaconda, and</i>
complex word	<i>dare-devil, shoo-in</i>
complex word (partially filled)	[N-s] (for regular plurals)
idiom (filled)	<i>going great guns, give the devil his due</i>
idiom (partially filled)	<i>jog <someone's> memory, send <someone> to the cleaners</i>
covariational conditional	<i>the Xerthe Yer</i> (e.g. <i>the more you think about it, the less you understand</i>)
ditransitive (double object)	Subj Obj1 Obj2 (e.g. <i>he gave her a fish taco; he baked her a muffin</i>)
passive	Subj Aux VPpp (PP _{by}) (e.g. <i>the armadillo was hit by a car</i>)

defined as a subset of phrases that are maximally conventionalized, and which exhibit the above idiomatcity features different extents (thus resonating with recent grammatical theories like Construction Grammar; see Wulff (2008) for an empirical study of these features in V NP-idioms, adopting a constructionist perspective). Howarth (1998), for example, proposes a model in which phrases can be located on a phraseological spectrum ranging from free combinations to restricted collocations, figurative idioms, and pure idioms (in increasing order of conventionalization, figuration, and formal inflexibility).

This positioning of idioms as one instantiation of phraseological language establishes the link to the second meaning of *idiomatcity* that is of central relevance in a second language acquisition context: the ability to express oneself fluently and accurately *at the same time*. Error-free production alone does not guarantee fluency; conversely, fluent production does not entail accurate production. Advanced level proficiency requires combining the two in a target-like, or idiomatic fashion (Pawley and Syder, 1983). As Howarth (1998) notes,

[M]any learners fail to understand the existence of the central area of the phraseological spectrum between free combinations and idioms. It is in handling restricted collocations that errors of both a lexical and grammatical structure constantly occur.

(p. 186)

In this sense, idiomatcity can be seen as a major indicator of (advanced) language proficiency (Yorio, 1989).

Psycholinguistic explorations of idiomatcity from an SLA perspective

The wealth of theoretical literature, as well as psycholinguistic studies of idiom processing by native speakers (see Cacciari and Tabossi, 1995 for an overview) stands at odds with the scarcity of full-fledged theoretical models of L2 idiom processing and acquisition. In line with Howarth's (1998) observation quoted above, there is general agreement that the mastery of idiomatic language characterizes only advanced L2 learners, and that this acquisition process is a gradual one.

Matlock and Heredia (2002) outline an account in which the way idioms are processed shifts with increasing language proficiency: beginner level learners start out translating the idiom back to their native language before the figurative meaning of the expression is accessed; advanced language learners process the figurative meanings increasingly directly. According to Liontas (2002), both the literal and the figurative meaning of an idiom are processed separately, and interpretation defaults to literal interpretations; alternative interpretations are gradually eliminated through cues afforded by the context. Similarly, Cieřlicka's *Literal Salience Resonant* (LSR) model of L2 idiom comprehension is based on the assumption that literal meanings are inherently more salient to the learner (Cieřlicka,

2010). The learning of figurative meanings is a process of automatization in which the connections between the lexical nodes of the idiom's constituent words in the learner's mental lexicon are gradually strengthened through repeated co-activation until the figurative meaning can be accessed holistically in the lexical network.

See also: automaticity, chunking and pre-fabrication, formulaic language, fluency, language and the lexicon in SLA, metaphor

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Implicational scaling

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Implicational scaling is a method for the handling of language variation by looking at the distribution of linguistic features. The aim is to describe the implicational relations between certain items, such that the presence of X implies the presence of Y, but not vice versa. Implicational scaling was first introduced by Guttman (1944) to measure social