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# A NEW TAXONOMY OF ENGLISH IDIOMATICITY

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## ABSTRACT

There have been many different opinions, definitions, and classifications among different scholars as to what constitutes an idiom or idiomatic expression and what it does not. Scholars disagree on definitions, characterizations and classifications of idioms and have their own views about them. Thus, it has been rather thorny to define the term in a straightforward and systematic way. Hence the notion of idiomaticity should be given special and due attention.

Numerous classifications of idioms have been proposed, namely semantic, syntactic, lexical, functional, and lexicographical; and a range of forms have been introduced in an attempt to attain a comprehensive description of idioms. Nevertheless there seems to be residual ambiguity that still exists, making it intricate to reach a consensus on the notion idiom.

This study proposes a comprehensive model of idioms in English that takes all the features and types presented in previous studies refines and collapses them into one unified table. The rationale is to provide a better classification and a view on what idioms are. The proposed model consists of ten major categories: Meaning, Form/meaning, Transparency, Compositionality, Lexemicity, Frozenness (Syntactic Flexibility), Structure, Function, Lexical Fixity, and Formality, with each category having its own sub-categories.

**KEYWORDS:** Idioms, Idiomaticity, Lexemity, Frozenness, Compositionality, Transparency, Meaning, Function

## INTRODUCTION

Language as a system of communication has literal and figurative meanings. While the literal sense is not problematic, the figurative sense consists of the imaginative description or a special effect, including notions like metaphors, similes, proverbs and idioms. Every natural language has idiomatic expressions; they are an essential part of every language.

In idiomatic expressions the literal meanings of the individual words of a phrase are of secondary importance and the emphasis is entirely put on the meaning of the whole word sequence. Hence idioms have two aspects: separate words put together, and a meaning as a single unit. Thus the meaning of the whole is figurative and, in most of the cases, commonly known. A classic example of an idiomatic expression is *to kick the bucket*, which means *to die*.

Idioms, as means of non-literal language, carry a metaphorical sense that renders their comprehension tricky, since their meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of their constituent parts. Idiomatic expressions take various forms and structures. In different books idioms are divided in different groups and different kinds of idioms are listed.

### The Problem of Definition & Classification

While an idiom is taken simply as a combination of words with a figurative meaning which has nothing to do with

the literal meanings of the words from which it is composed, sounds so controversial that different scholars have differing views concerning its form, structure, meaning, function, etc.

Idioms are not well-defined and that is exactly why literature abounds in attempts to define the content and form of this term and to establish a unified terminology. On this point, Moon (1998: 3) remarks that “an ambiguous term which is used in conflicting ways". Moreover, Linda and Flavell (2000: 6) find that idioms are “anomalies of language, mavericks of the linguistic world.” For Palmer, (1976: 81), “What is and what is not an idiom is, then, often a matter of degree.”

Moreover, there are anomalies concerning naming the phenomenon of idiom, represented by some of the suggested labels. Thus, Everaert et al. (1995) prefer to use ‘complex unit’; Wray (2000) uses the expression ‘single big word’; Mel'čuk (1995) prefers the term ‘phrasemes’; Carter (1998) uses the term ‘fixed expressions’; Moon (1998) picks up the term ‘multi-word items’; Howarth (1998) prompts for the term ‘phraseology’, whereas McCarthy (1998) prefers the traditional term idiom and Gläser (1984) the term ‘phraseological unit’.

Again, and as for definitions, there seems to be no one unified definition. This is evident in the number of different definition attempted. To start with, Wright, (2002: 7), defines the term ‘idiom’ as “an expression with the following features: it is fixed and is recognized by native speakers. You cannot make your own! And it uses language in a non-literal metaphorical way.”

Further, Gramley and Patzold (1992: 71), define it as "a complex lexical item which is longer than a word form but shorter than a sentence, and has a meaning that cannot be derived from knowledge of its component parts". Seidl and McMordie (1988: 13) define it "as a number of words which, when taken together, have a different meaning from the individual meaning of each word". For Botehlo da Silva and Cutler (1993: 129), idioms are defined by their property of ‘semantic eccentricity’, as "meaningful strings whose meaning is not a direct function of the meaning of their components."

Moreover, for Nunberg et al (1994: 492), idiom is applied to an ambiguous category defined on the one hand by "ostension of prototypical" examples. Idioms are seen as implicit opposition to related categories like formula, fixed phrases, collocations, clichés, sayings, proverbs, and allusions. Fernando, (1996: 30-31), defines idiom as "indivisible units whose components cannot be varied or vary only within definable limits." For Glucksberg (2001: 68), idiom is "a construction whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its constituents."

The most plausibly feasible definition is that provided by Crystal (2008: 236) who defines idioms as "a term used in GRMMAR and LEXICOLOGY to refer to a SEQUENCE of WORDS which SEMANTICALLY and often SYNTACTICALLY restricted and function as a single UNIT." [original emphasis]

All these various and different views offered by different scholars reflect ongoing attempts to define what an idiom or idiomatic expression is and what it is not. Scholars disagree on classifications of idioms and, accordingly, have their own views about them.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF IDIOMS

As there have been different views, labels and definitions among scholars concerning the definition of idiom, again there are different views on what exactly characterizes idioms. To start with, Bell (1991: 3) lists four essential

properties of idioms:

- **Alteration of grammatical rules:** idiomatic expressions are not always grammatical.
- **Conventional phrases:** idioms are special expressions that well known and agreed upon by all the members of a particular speech community.
- **Alteration of word order:** idiomatic expressions do not usually follow word order.
- **Figurativeness:** the words in an idiomatic expression are used metaphorically.

  Further, Nunberg et al. (1994, 492-3), mention six properties of idioms

  - **Conventionality:** idioms are conventionalized;
  - **Inflexibility:** idioms are fixed phrases;
  - **Figuration:** idioms are used figuratively through some figures of speech such as metaphors, metonymy, and hyperboles;
- **Proverbiality:** idioms are used to describe and explain a repeated situation of particular social interest;
- **Informality:** idioms are typically associated with relatively informal or colloquial language, popular speech and oral culture; and
- **Affect:** Idioms are typically used to indicate a certain evaluation or affective stance toward the things they denote.

  Moreover, Fernando (1996, 3), lists three main features of idioms:

  - **Compositeness:** idioms are commonly accepted as a type of multiword expression. That is, idioms consist of two or more lexical constituents.
  - **Institutionalization:** idioms are conventionalized expressions. That is, idioms first begin temporarily, and then become part of society and normal cultural use through consistent use.
  - **Semantic opacity:** the meaning of an idiom is not the sum of its constituents (an idiom is often non-literal), i.e. an idiom cannot be understood literally.

In addition to the above lists of characteristic of idioms, there are many other lists of features of idioms presented by many other scholars like: Makkai (1972); Cowie et al, (1983); and Wright, (2002) among others.

**Previous Approaches and Taxonomies**

One of the thorniest issues in research on the notion of idiom and idiomaticity has been use of terminology and delimitation of the concept. (Meier: 1975). In previous studies, idioms have been classified in a variety of ways by different researchers from different perspectives: lexical, semantic, syntactic, lexicographical, pragmatic, discoursal, and functional. This study presents some of these taxonomies, mainly, Roberts (1944); Katz and Postal (1963); Chafe (1968); Weinreich (1969); Fraser (1970); Newmeyer (1972; 1974); Nunberg (1978); Fernando and Flavell (1981); and Strassler (1982). In what follows, a brief description of each of these approaches and taxonomies will be attempted.

**Roberts' (1944) Socio-Cultural Approach**

Roberts' early approach (1944) is one of the earliest attempts towards a definition of idiom in which he adopts a view that an idiom is "the idiosyncrasy of permutation which a given language exhibits in contradistinction to all other language or a given period exhibits in contrast to all previous periods' (Roberts, 1944:300). Thus, what constitutes an idiom is institutionalization that idioms undergo through frequent use by members of a given speech community in their common, everyday communication exchanges.

**Katz and Postal's (1963) Transformational Generative Approach**

Katz and Postal are the pioneers in attempting to deal with idioms from a transformational generative perspective. For them, idioms are considered as 'exceptions that prove the rule' of compositionality as their meaning is not obtained from the meanings of their individual parts. For them, if an idiom is taken compositionally, its semantic properties and relations will not be different from other word sequences.

**Chafe's (1968) Naturalist Approach**

Chafe dealt with the phenomenon of idioms in a way to show how the Chomskyan paradigm missed the most important target of the character of idioms. His approach was a call for the need for a linguistic theory to explain idioms in a more natural way.

**Weinreich's (1969) Transformational Generative Approach**

In an effort to specify the features that differentiate idioms from the wider set of phraseological units, Weinreich's defines idiom as "a phraseological unit that involves at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses, will be called an *idiom*. Thus some phraseological units are idioms; others are not." (1969: 42) Further, Weinreich draws a distinction between the 'idiomaticity of expressions' and the 'stability of collocations', stating that the distinction lies in the co-occurrence phenomenon but while that co-occurrence of words in an idiom results in a special semantic relationship, it is not evident in collocations. (ibid: 71)

**Fraser's (1970) Transformational Generative Approach**

Fraser's approach is the most insightful treatment that enriched the Transformational-Generative view of idioms. Most of the discussion constitutes an effort to offer a theoretically feasible explanation of the semantic representation of phrasal idioms in the deep structure of a sentence as well as of their prominent recalcitrance in terms of particular syntactic transformations. He proposed the frozenness hierarchy that subsumes six levels: unrestricted, reconstitution, extraction, permutation, insertion, adjunction, and completely frozen. (1970: 39)

**Newmeyer's (1972; 1974) Syntactic Approach**

Newmeyer (1972; 1974) approach views an idiom as "…a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed." (1974: 327) Thus, his attempt was to prove that there is far some kind of regularity to the behaviour of idioms in terms of their syntactic behavior.

**Nunberg's (1978) Semantic Taxonomy**

Nunberg (1978) proposed a typology for characterizing how literal meanings of idiom components contribute (or do not contribute) to the overall interpretation of idiomatic phrases. According to this system, idiomatic expressions may be arranged into three different classes: normally decomposable idioms, abnormally decomposable idioms and semantically nondecomposable idioms.

**Fernando and Flavell's (1981) Semantic Approach**

Fernando and Flavell (1981) acknowledge the intricacy of idiomaticity as a phenomenon. In this sense they define an idiom as "a non-literal set expression whose meaning is not a compositional function of its syntactic constraints but which always has a homonymous literal counterpart." (ibid: 48) In their view, there is the need for a view of idioms that take varying degrees of idiomaticity along a continuum that correlate with different types or categories of idiom.

**Strassler's (1982) Pragmatic Approach**

Strassler's (1982) pragmatic analysis of idioms consists one of the first serious attempts to investigate the discoursal functions of idioms drawing heavily on the speech-act theory. The aim of his study is to identify the discoursal pragmatic functions of idioms and to identify the peculiar properties of idioms which distinguish them from other lexical combinations.

## CLASSIFICATION OF IDIOMS

The classification of idioms also varies among linguists and scholars. Some of them classify idioms according to form, and others according to meaning. Regarding the form, structure, and function of idiom, different approaches have been adopted, and many models have been presented. In term of content, numerous classifications of idioms have been proposed, namely semantic, syntactic, lexical, functional, and lexicographical; and a range of forms have been introduced in an attempt to attain an comprehensive description of idioms.

Nevertheless there seems to be residual ambiguity that still exists, making it intricate to reach a consensus on the notion idiom. According to Fernando (1996, 35-36), idioms are classified into three sub-classes:

- **Pure Idioms:** is a type of conventionalized, non-literal multiword expression.
- **Semi-Idioms:** composed of two constituents one with literal and the other with non-literal meaning
- **Literal Idioms:** idioms which are less semantically complex than pure and semi-idioms

On the other hand, Moon (1998: 22-23) classifies idioms depending on the degrees of transparency into:

- **Transparent Metaphors:** these are institutionalized in which the hearer/reader can understand the image via his/her real-world knowledge.
- **Semi–Transparent Metaphors:** in these types of idioms the hearer/reader needs some special knowledge to understand them, and if the idiomatic meaning is unknown there may be two or more possible interpretation.
- **Opaque Metaphors** or pure idioms in which the interpretation and understanding the image is completely impossible without knowledge of the historical origins of the expression.

On the same above dimension, Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991) (cited in Glusberg, 1993: 17) classify idioms into:

- **Compositional-Opaque Idioms** in which relations between an idiom's component and its idiomatic meaning are not clear.
- **Compositional-Transparent Idioms** in which there are one-to-one semantic relations between the idiom's constituents and components of the idiom's meaning usually because of metaphorical correspondences between them.
- **Quasi–Metaphorical Idioms** in which the idiomatic meaning can be understood through the "literal referent".

As for the relationship between form and meaning, Seidl and McMordie (1988, 13) classify idioms into:

- Irregular form / clear meaning, as in *Do someone proud.*
- Regular form / unclear meaning, as in *Have a bee in one's bonnet.*
- Irregular form / unclear meaning, as in *Be at daggers drawn*

In terms of form, Makkai, Boatner and Gates (1999: VII) classify idioms into four major groups:

- **Lexemic idioms:** are those idioms which correlate with the familiar parts of speech, which in turn subdivide into:

  **Verbal idioms** such as *Work out*

  **Nominal idioms** such as *Cool cat*

  **Adjectival idioms** such as *Pepper and salt*

  **Adverbial idioms** such as *Hammer and tongs*

- **Tournures:** or phraseological idioms often consist of a complete clause, such as:

*Fly off the handle, To blow one's stack*

- **Well established saying and proverbs** such as: *Don't wash your linen in public*

McCarthy and O'Dell (2002: 6) propose a classification of idioms based on structure with seven categories:

- **Verb+ object/complement** such as in: *kill two birds with one stone*
- **Prepositional phrase** such as in: *in the blink of an eye*
- **Compound** such as in: *a bone of contention*
- **Simile** (as+ adjective+ as) such as in: *as dry as bone*
- **Binomial** (word+ and+ word) such as in: *rough and ready*
- **Trinomial** (word+ word+ and+ word) such as in: *cool, calm and collected*
- **Whole clause or sentence** such as in: *to cut a long story short*

Cowie et al. (1983: xi) proposed the most detailed classification of idioms in terms of their syntax, semantics and function. Syntactically they classify idioms into two general headings:

- **Clause idioms**
- **Phrase Idioms**

Semantically, they proposed four types:

- **Pure idioms**
- **Figurative idioms**
- **Restricted collocations**
- **Open collocations**

In terms of function, they classify idioms into:

- **Sayings**
- **Catchphrases**

In addition to the above classifications, there are many others, like: Makkai (1972); Strassler (1982); Halliday (1985); and Grant (2003).

## THE PROPOSED MODEL

The proposed model is intended to present in a tabular form be a comprehensive list of almost all the types, forms, structures, and functions. It consists of ten categories that present almost all the features and classifications found in the previous works on idioms. These categories are:

- **Meaning**

This category, which consists of five sub-categories (pure, semi, literal, open collocation, and restricted collocation), is about the conventionality of idioms, i.e., whether or not the constituents reveal the meaning of the idiom.

- **Form / Meaning**

This category, which subsumes three subcategories (irregular form but clear meaning, regular form but unclear meaning, and irregular form and unclear meaning), is about how the form of the idiom corresponds with its meaning.

- **Transparency (Spectrum of Idiomticity)**

This category includes six subcategories (transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, opaque, metaphorical, and semi-metaphorical). These have to do with the degree of transparency the idiom has. This can best be seen as a spectrum ranging from purely transparent to purely opaque.

- **Compositionality**

This category has to do with whether or not the idiom is compositional. It includes five sub-categories (compositional, non-compositional, semi- compositional, compositional opaque, and compositional-transparent).

- **Lexemicity**

This category, with its greatest number of subcategories, marks the form of idiom as (nominal, verbal, adverbial, adjectival, phrasal verb, tournure, irreversible binomial, phrasal compound, incorporating verb, and pseudo-idioms)

**Frozenness (Syntactic Flexibility)**

The sixth category is about the extent to which the structure of the idioms permits syntactic change. It includes seven subcategories (unrestricted, reconstitution, extraction, permutation, insertion, adjunction, and completely frozen).

- **Structure**

The structure category indicates the pattern of the idiom in terms of four types (phrasal, clausal, subjectless clause, and sentence).

- **Function**

In terms of function, six subcategories are identified (saying, catchphrase, proverb, frozen simile, euphemism, and quotation) which indicates the function an idiom has in the text.

- **Lexical Fixity**

This category has to do with the extent to which the morphological and lexical shape of the idiom is fixed or not. It includes two subcategories (fixed, and flexible).

- **Formality**

The last category is about whether the idiom is formal or not, with two subcategories (formal, and informal).

Below is the proposed model in tabular form.

**Table 1**

**A Model for English Idioms Classification**

| Meaning | Form/meaning | Transparency | Compositionality | Lexemicity | Frozenness Syntactic Flexibility | Structure | Function | Lexical Fixity | Formality |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| pure | Regular-clear | Transparent | Compositional | Nominal | Unrestricted | Phrasal | Saying | Fixed | Formal |
| Semi | Irregular-clear | Semi–transparent | Non-compositional | Adverbial | Reconstitution | Clausal | Catchphrase | Flexible | Informal |
| Literal | Regular-unclear | Semi-Opaque | Figurative | Verbal | Extraction | Subjectless clause | Proverb | | |
| Open-collocation | | Opaque | Semi-compositional | Adjectival | Permutation | Sentence | Frozen simile | | |
| Restricted-collocation | | metaphorical | Pure-opaque | Phrasal verb | Insertion | | Euphemism | | |
| | | Quasi–metaphorical | Compositional opaque | Tournure | Adjunction | | Quotation | | |
| | | | Compositional-transparent | Irreversible binomial | Completely Frozen | | | | |
| | | | | Phrasal compound | | | | | |
| | | | | Incorporating verb | | | | | |
| | | | | Pseudo-idioms | | | | | |

## CONCLUSIONS

Idiomaticity is still the thorniest issue in linguistic research as two major problems persist. These are the use of terminology and delimitation of the notion. Numerous classifications of idioms have been proposed, namely semantic, syntactic, lexical, functional, and lexicographical; and a range of forms have been introduced in an attempt to attain a comprehensive description of idioms. But none of these seem to be an all-embracing taxonomy of the types, forms, or functions of idioms.

This present study has proposed a comprehensive model of idioms in English that takes all the features and types presented in previous studies refines and collapses them into one unified table. The rationale is to provide a better classification and a view on what English idioms are and thus to give a clearer picture of what types, forms, and functions English idioms have. The proposed model consists of ten major categories: Meaning, Form/meaning, Transparency, Compositionality, Lexemicity, Frozenness (Syntactic Flexibility), Structure, Function, Lexical Fixity, and Formality, with each category having its own sub-categories.

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