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Introduction to Idiomatic English

Learning to recognize
prefabrication in language

More remembering, less putting together

- ❖ “With a few syllables [language] can express an incalculable number of thoughts....This would be impossible, were we not able to distinguish parts in the thoughts corresponding to the parts of a sentence, so that the structure of the sentence serves as the image of the structure of the thought” (Frege 1923).
- ❖ “The Principle of Compositionality (of meaning). The meaning of a complex term is a syntax-dependent function of the meanings of its syntactic parts. “ (Werner 2012).
- ❖ “It is evident that rote recall is a factor of minute importance in ordinary use of language, that a minimum of the sentences that we utter is learnt by heart as such (...) most of our linguistic experience, both as speakers and hearers, is with new sentences” (Chomsky, 1988, 1964, p. 8).
- ❖ “This is the essence of the language instinct: language conveys news” (Pinker, 2007, p. 84).
- ❖ If so, then how is (conversational) fluency possible? And why is native-like selection so predictable? (Pawley & Syder, 1983)
- ❖ “Speakers do at least as much remembering as they do putting together” (Bolinger, 1979).

Idiomatic English

- ❖ Grammatical English vs. Idiomatic English
- ❖ “A successful candidate will have demonstrated the ability to write mature, fluent, **accurate and idiomatic English** on behalf of an employer, choosing technical terms, tone, form and content appropriate to the requirements of a particular situation.” [BNC HBP]
- ❖ “The accurate and appropriate use of English expressions which are in the broadest sense idiomatic is one distinguishing mark of a native command of that language and a reliable measure of the proficiency of foreign learners.” (Cowie, Mackin, McCaig 1993)

Phraseological units

- ❖ **Lexicon vs. Phrasicon**

- ❖ **Phrases and clauses**

- ❖ Pure idioms (semantically opaque). The meaning of the whole is impossible to infer from the meanings of its part: *to blow the gaff on/about*
- ❖ Figurative idioms. The meaning is metaphorically inferred from the meanings of its constituents: *bark up the wrong tree, a narrow/close shave, a narrow escape, go off the rails, a dark horse (can be culture-specific too)*. Many conventional (conceptual) metaphors are figurative idioms.
- ❖ Restricted collocations: *jog someone's memory, a blind alley, a Pyrrhic victory, strong tea, powerful car*. An extreme case: cranberry collocations: *kith and kin, spick and span, to and fro*.
- ❖ Open collocations: *to fill the sink, a broken nose (a fractured nose, a broken bone)*
- ❖ Open-ended collocations: *to entertain + idea, notion, doubt, suspicion (cognitive state)*

Sentence-Long P Us

- ❖ Sentence-long or sentence-like phraseological units include (Gläser 1998):
 - ❖ “PROVERBS: *Make hay while the sun shines. One swallow does not make a summer* (culture-specific).
 - ❖ COMMONPLACES: *Boys will be boys. Wait and see. It’s a small world.*
 - ❖ ROUTINE FORMULAE: *Come again? Mind the step. Looking forward to seeing you. Hold your horses.*
 - ❖ SLOGANS: *Value for money. Safety first.*
 - ❖ COMMANDMENTS AND MAXIMS: *Thou shalt not kill. Do it yourself.*
 - ❖ QUOTATIONS AND WINGED WORDS: *Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise. A Jekyll and Hyde. Catch 22.”*

Connotative meaning

- ❖ “A cloud of culture condensed in a drop of phraseology” (Wierzbicka 2007)
- ❖ Glaser 1998:

- EXPRESSIVE CONNOTATIONS

- derogatory: *mutton dressed as lamb; to breed like rabbits*

- taboo: *get stuffed; son of a bitch*

- euphemistic: *the great divide; to live in sin; of a certain age*

- jocular/humorous: *Darby and Joan; to have a bun in the oven*

- STYLISTIC CONNOTATIONS

- colloquial/informal: *green fingers; every man Jack; full of beans; fine and dandy; before you can say lack Robinson; clear off!*

- slang: *reach-me-downs; to kip down; on the never-never*

- formal: *the compliments of the season; a bone of contention; gainfully employed; to be the question; under the aegis*

- literary: *the alpha and omega; hermetically sealed; irretrievably lost; between Scylla and Charybdis*

- archaic: *in days of yore; as it came to pass; thou shalt not kill*

- foreign: *in casu belli; sine qua non; carte blanche; comme il faut*

- REGISTER MARKERS

- astronomy: *black hole; red giant*

- economics: *a high flier, idle funds; intermittent dumping*

- judicial: *burden of proof, minister without portfolio; persona non grata*

- medical: *corpus luteum; benign tumour, Caesarian section; pepper-and-salt fundus (= fundus oculi)*

Beyond sentences

- ❖ Jokes, recipes
- ❖ Formulaic language in works of literature: Page (1976) observes that about one-fifth of Homer's Iliad is "composed of lines wholly repeated from one place to another"
- ❖ Stories and fables
- ❖ Poems? Plays? Movie scripts?

Discourse formulas

- ❖ Formulas (formulae):
 - ❖ Pragmatic markers (“social cohesion devices”): *you know*
 - ❖ Discourse markers (“text-linking devices”): *I mean*
 - ❖ Stance expressions:
 - ❖ Modal particles: *or something*
- ❖ Lexical bundles (mostly discourse markers?)
 - ❖ The difficult thing for me was the fact that...
 - ❖ There’s times when...