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ON ERRORS IN IDIOMATIC ENGLISH

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The present paper is concerned with the difficulties which the foreign learner faces in idiomatic English. Its aim is to account for the errors in idiomatic usage and to prove that any method of teaching English phraseology should recognize the importance of selectional restrictions and the context of situation, which should reinforce the traditional memorization of idioms with their equivalents in the native language.

Since there is among linguists no unanimous decision as to what is and what is not an idiom we shall accept the following assumptions:

1. According to Weinreich /1966:42/, among phraseological units, i.e. expressions in which at least one constituent is polysemous, and in which a selection of a subsense is determined by the verbal context, some structures are idioms, i.e. expressions involving at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses¹.

2. According to Fraser /1970:30/, some idioms are ambiguous /e.g. kick the bucket in its idiomatic sense means something like "die", whereas in non-idiomatic sense it means simply "strike the pail with one's foot"/ and some are not /for instance, there is no non-idiomatic sense of beat around the bush/, so we can make a distinction between idioms which have literal counterparts and

those which have not ².

3. According to Katz and Postal /1964; cf. also Fraser, 1970/, idioms are subdivided into LEXICAL /numerous polymorphemic lexical entries, such as knucklehead, overturn, etc., which within the framework of a transformational grammar must be analysed as dominated by single syntactic constituents, e.g. verb, adjective, noun, preposition etc./ and PHRASAL /having a more complicated constituent structure, which clearly must be analysed as an entire sentence, e.g. Has the cat got your tongue?/.

Having in this way settled our terminology let us proceed to the discussion of different types of problems of idiomatic English met by the foreign learner and different types of errors resulting from these problems. The examples of ill-use cited in the following sections have all been collected by the present writer during his teaching practice.

2.1. ERRORS IN IDIOMATIC ENGLISH CAUSED BY NEGATIVE TRANSFER

The errors resulting from negative transfer occur as an effect of unpredictability of idioms in the foreign language. Thus it does not seem very unlikely to hear a Polish learner of English produce structures like

/1/ ^xHe bought a cat in a sack. /for Kupił kota w worku/

and

/2/ ^xGive me peace. /for Daj mi spokój/

The above examples are illustrations of errors caused by lexical translation in those cases in which no appropriate counterpart of the Polish idiom, i.e. He bought a pig in a poke and Leave

me alone <in peace>; Let me be respectively in /1/ and /2/ has been learnt.

Using word-for-word translation the foreign learner will more often than not arrive at unacceptable or obviously non-sense solutions /though with /1/, for some reasons, he would be quite successful in other languages, e.g. French:

Il a acheté chat en poche, German: Er hat die Katze im Sack gekauft, or Russian: Он купил kota v meške/ due to negative transfer /i.e. interference/. It is interesting, however, that in some cases the transfer may be positive, and it seems advisable to specially draw the learner's attention to such cases. A Polish learner, for instance, having passed the stage of one-to-one correspondence failures may feel uncertain about such phraseological units as from time to time /cf. Polish od czasu do czasu/, stand somebody a beer /postawić komu piwo/, or with the naked eye /gołym okiem/, considering them "too Polish to be English" and eventually avoiding these expressions in his use of English.

2.2. ERRORS IN IDIOMATIC ENGLISH CAUSED BY INCORRECT SYNTACTIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND LEXICAL INSERTIONS

Here we shall concentrate on two kinds of errors : violation of the idiom structure by the application of some transformations according to the rules operating on syntactic structures which are not idiomatic and unacceptable extension of the idiom range by replacements or extra lexical items. The following sentences are examples of such ill-use:

/3/ ^xI know the first thing about skiing.

/4/ ^xIt's snowing cats and dogs.

In /3/ the positive transform is derived from a phrasal idiom which is always found in negative; in /4/ the special sense of cats and dogs is taken for granted as not dependent on the morpheme rain, but on its sense: "in an intense manner" /Weinreich, 1966:38/ ³, in which case the fairly frozen ⁴ idiom is defrosted, as it were.

Analysing these types of errors in idiomatic English we assume that the foreign learner has already mastered transformations like passivization, action and gerundive nominalizations etc., therefore unacceptable idiomatic expressions arrived at in the way exemplified above must be distinguished from those resulting directly from negative transfer as occurring at a more advanced level.

/3/ and /4/, as well as other examples cited elsewhere in this section, clearly imply that in teaching English phraseology any method consisting in the mere asking the learner to memorize a certain number of idioms, or at best complete sentences containing idioms, just cannot be fully successful. Acquiring the new idioms in this way the learner gets little information about the selectional restrictions, and not knowing exactly which transformations and other operations are permissible with any newly-acquired idiom, he is exposed to incorrect usage. It seems that the learner's demands could best be satisfied by an appropriate dictionary; that there is a lot of information to be provided by the latter in connection with almost any entry may be clarified by the following examples, quoted after Fraser /1970:35 ff/, all being samples of operations worth considering

in the analysis of idioms:

- /a/ ADJUNCTION of some non-idiomatic constituent to the idiom:
e.g. operations occurring in the application of the gerundive nominalization transformation, i.e. adjoining the possessive marker 's to the subject noun phrase and adjoining ing to the main verb, as in John's pulling my leg annoyed me; this, however, is not possible with an idiom like rub somebody the wrong way.

- /b/ INSERTION of some constituent into the idiom: e.g. the indirect object movement transformation, as in John read the riot act to the class ⇒ John read the class the riot act, or adverb insertion, as in We depend on him implicitly ⇒ We depend implicitly on him. Note that such placement of some non-idiomatic constituent into the idiom sequence is, for instance, not possible with ^xThe baby sitter cares frequently for my children.

- /c/ PERMUTATION of two successive constituents of the idiom, e.g. application of the particle movement rule to idioms of the verb-particle-noun phrase form, as in put on some weight ⇒ put some weight on; this is not possible with blow off some steam. Similarly, the yes-no question transformation, e.g. The cat has got your tongue ⇒ Has the cat got your tongue?; ^xIs it raining cats and dogs outside? is unacceptable, though.

- /d/ EXTRACTION of some constituent of the idiom to some extra-idiom position in the sentence, e.g. the passive

transformation which extracts the direct object noun phrase and places it outside the idiom, in the subject noun phrase position, e.g. The buck has been passed too often around here; similarly, preposing prepositional phrases ⁵, with either the preposition, e.g. On whom can we depend?, or the entire prepositional phrase, e.g. With a 10 foot pole I wouldn't touch that job, being extracted from the verbal idiom. Anyway, ^xFor what did you arrange? /a birthday party/ is not acceptable ⁶.

/e/ RECONSTITUTION of the idiom into another constituent structure organization, e.g. action nominalization transformation, as in He laid down the law to his daughter ⇒ His laying down of the law to his daughter ... This, however, is not possible with screw up one's courage.

We have assembled these transformational anomalies of idioms in order to prove that the learner is faced with a great many problems; still, the above are only part of difficulties of idiomatic English. While the first type of errors discussed in this section is a result of the application of syntactic transformations predicted by the idiom structure ⁷, the other type /e.g. /4// ⁸ is caused by variation of constituents. The foreign learner may not simply recognize the degree of frozenness of the idiom and thus feel free to replace one of the constituents by its synonyms or antonyms. It must be clear, though, that if arrived at intentionally, this latter type of violation is just word-play, and as such will be discussed in section 2.3. A structure like

/5/ There's less to it than meets the eye.

would then be marked with an asterisk if it belonged to the foreign learner's non-intentional use; if used by a native speaker of English /as it has recently been uttered by a member of a B.B.C. panel concerned with some controversial film/ it would be taken for granted to be a stylistic device.

2.3. ERRORS IN IDIOMATIC ENGLISH CAUSED BY THE FALSE RECOGNITION OF STYLE AND SITUATION

"The familiar compliment paid to the language learner: "You speak the language better than we do" may be taken to mean: "You express yourself in a formal idiom which no native speaker would ever use". /Rivers, 1968:167/.

The above quotation is illustrative of the subject to be discussed within this section: the extralinguistic context of English idioms and common errors resulting from the foreign learner's ignorance of styles, registers, and situations: artificial or even ridiculous uses.

The first source of problems to be analysed here is that of the geographical distribution of English idioms. It is important for the foreign learner to know which of the idioms he has learnt are strictly British, which are strictly American, and which are readily accepted by both English speaking communities⁹. Some idioms are self-explanatory in this sense, e.g. I'll bet my bottom dollar /that Jane is pregnant/, which can easily be classified among American English idioms /the example was taken from Fraser, 1970:35/, but in many cases the learner may be uncertain about the origin.

Another important aspect of the idiomatic usage is its

dependence upon particular styles and registers of use. The foreign learner should treat idiomatic expressions of English in terms of situations in which they are habitually used. We shall mention here, after Cowie and Mackin /1975/, the most important situational factors which are reflected in the style of idioms:

- " /i/ the relationship between the speakers, or correspondents /remote and official, or intimate and relaxed/
- /ii/ whether one is speaking or writing /compare a spoken commentary of a football match with a newspaper report of it/
- /iii/ the level of seriousness, detachment etc. suggested or imposed by the occasion /compare a speech at an official banquet with one given at a farewell party for a personal friend/. /Cowie and Mackin, 1975:lix/.

Dictionaries usually specify the limits in the use of idioms, marking them with various labels of style /e.g. FORMAL, INFORMAL <FAMILIAR> <COLLOQUIAL>, SLANG, <TABOO> <VULGAR>, PEJORATIVE, EUPHEMISTIC, METAPHORICAL, OLD FASHIONED etc./ and register, i.e. occupational and professional fields /e.g. LEGAL, MILITARY, PARLIAMENTARY etc./. All these labels can appear helpful if the learner is acquainted with varieties of English in general. Quirk /1970:248/, for example, says that "A haphazard knowledge of several styles may be worse than useless if we do not know the type of occasion on which each is appropriate, or if we do not know when we are sliding from one to another. We do not say

"It was extremely gracious of you to invite me, Lady Jones, and I've had bags of fun", because "bags of fun" does not mix with "extremely gracious", and because to use an expression like "bags of fun", we should need to know Lady Jones well enough to be addressing her by her first name".

Another important aspect of English phraseology in its stylistic and situational sense is the reflexion of language change in it. The number of phraseological units steadily increases /cf. Akhmanova and Mikael' an, 1969:101/, yet at the same time, many of them disappear from a widespread usage. In view of this fact it is absolutely necessary that the teaching of idiomatic English should be based on the latest occurrence of expressions. Unfortunately, it so happens that the learner is in the first place taught those idioms which in some way appear to be funny or picturesque, and presumably for this reason easier to memorize, e.g. as drunk as a lord /and the like/, set the Thames on fire; like a bear with a sore head etc. The present writer's intention, it must be clear, is not to forsake all these idioms altogether; on the contrary, they should be studied, but the learner must be aware of the fact that they have now fallen out of use, and that to exert these "old favourites" in every-day conversational English may mean to sound odd, i.e. not like native speakers ¹⁰.

If we take a closer look at the way in which idioms are used by native speakers of English we shall notice several peculiarities, which should shed new light on the teaching of English phraseology. One of them is using idioms for all sorts of effect, usually for fun. Chafe /1970/ has pointed out that

this device is triggered off by "semantic leakage in the literalization of an idiom": "If I say, for example, Sam kicked the bucket, both my hearer and I may have some vague image of him striking a pail with his foot, even though my intention was to say that he died and even though my hearer understands perfectly well what my intention was. If I use the idiom red herring my mind may not be entirely free of thoughts of a crimson fish. /.../ Examples like those just mentioned suggest that at least a weak bypassing of the idiom often takes place, whereby a postsemantic literalization is, in a secondary way, a kind of ghost semantic structure. An intentional, playful turning on and off of this effect is exhibited in many puns: "Just now he's sitting on a cloud, but it may not support him very long". /Chafe, 1970:70/.

Puns, or play on words, very often involving the ambiguity resulting from the literalization of idioms, are devices frequently used in advertisements and jokes. The former field may be illustrated by an example quoted by Leech:

/6/ When the wind has a bite - and you feel like a bite -
then bite on a Whole Nut.

where the first two occurrences of bite are parts of special idioms, whereas the third is in its usual verbal meaning /Leech, 1966:185/. An analysis of the way in which humour is based on idiomatic English may be found in Potcheptsov /1974/. Here we shall only exemplify it by a few quotations:

/7/ Being a taxi driver is one of the pleasantest jobs ...
you're always running into nice people.

/8/ SHE: "You're the nicest boy that I have ever met"

HE: "Tell it to the marines".

SHE: "I have - to dozens of them".

/9/ In an argument, the best weapon to hold is the tongue.

/Potcheptsov, 1974:43 ff/.

Another intriguing feature of English phraseology is that highly frozen idioms /and with rare occurrence/ or those belonging to the colloquial style, when used in a formal spoken or written discourse, are accompanied by some expressions indicating that the author is mentioning the idioms for some kind of effect. The same attenuating expressions are found before those idioms which are notorious clichés /to which a few paragraphs are devoted below/. Here we have in mind expressions like as they say, one might say, so to speak etc. and their numerous variants, or just lexical insertions, as in Sam kicked the proverbial bucket /cf. Polish Brak mu przysłowiowej piatej klepki or postawić przysłowiową kropkę nad "i"/. Chafe /1968:124/ called these devices "semantic units with meanings something like "this is an idiom" /cf. Lewicki's /1974:151/ OPERATOR TESTYMONIAL-NOŚCI/; they function in speech in much the same way as the inverted commas in writing.

An undeniable function of English phraseological units, inclusive of many idioms, is their realization as clichés, i.e., as Rivers /1968:168/ puts it, "tags and formulas now empty of precise denotation, /.../ expletives and exclamations, which give the speaker time to recognize his thoughts and select the form in which he wishes to express them, /.../, pauses and changes in

structure as an utterance proceeds. Were these omitted, speech would proceed more rapidly, and it would be beyond the listener - speaker to assimilate much quick-fire conversation. We have only to listen too carefully to our friends gossiping over their morning coffee to realize how frequently the same hackneyed phrases and exclamations recur".

Largely owing to their frequent occurrence clichés are important for the foreign learner. Ginzburg et al. /1966:88/, for instance, hold that "It is self-evident that clichés are of great importance in practical language learning as speech is not so much the mastery of vocabulary as such, but acquisition of a set of speech habits in using word-groups in general and clichés in particular". Similarly Rivers /1968:168/ referring to the earlier described functions of clichés says: "Recognition of these features of informal communication has been the basis for the advocacy of DIALOGUE LEARNING as a technique for elementary classes. Teachers who have taken over an advanced class which has not had teaching in the oral skill have also found that dialogue learning helps students to acquire rapidly those frequently recurring phrases which make for ease of communication - greetings; expressions of impatience, dismay, or surprise; conventional expressions of agreement and polite disagreement; common forms of question and noncommittal answer; expletives and exclamations which give the speaker time to search for the correct form to express his meaning".

Bearing in mind the above discussion, we can only give the positive answer to the question whether the foreign learner should be taught a wide range of trite idiomatic expressions

like you may take my word for it or it stands to reason that After all, the foreign learner may think it necessary to use in the foreign language the same devices which he frequently uses in his native language.

In the light of all the facts presented in this section it now seems clear that the stylistic and situational aspects of idiomatic English, as not always predicted for the learner, must be taken into consideration if the memorized idioms are to be used properly.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have briefly reviewed the most important problems in the idiomatic English and the most frequent types of errors in idiomatic usage. Now a point has been reached in our discussion at which it is possible to draw some conclusions.

1. Teaching English phraseology must be based on careful selectional restrictions analysis on the one hand, and on the assigning of geographical, stylistic and situational limits on the other. Instead of just pointing out to the learner how funny and picturesque the idiom rain cats and dogs is the teacher should, in the place, say something of its frozenness and transformational imperfection, not to mention the fact that this particular idiom cannot be recommended as a useful expression in talking about the weather.
2. The selection of the phraseological material should be checked against the recent occurrence of idioms, especially in every-day conversational English.

3. The learner should be discouraged from using idioms only to show how much English he has learnt, as this can lead to very artificial uses. Apparently, too, native speakers of English are apt to make fun of such situations, using wordplay /i.e. utilizing the effect of semantic leakage in the literalization of the idiom/, as in

/10/ FOREIGN SPEAKER: "Would you give me a hand with these boxes please?"

NATIVE SPEAKER : "Certainly. Which one?"

4. There surely is a need to refer the learner to dictionaries which would specify linguistic and non-linguistic contexts of English idioms. Hoping that some more dictionaries of this sort are in the making, the present author can, for the time being, recommend the advanced learners the work by Cowie and Mackin /1975/, referred to frequently throughout this paper. Confined to the idioms composed of verbs with particles and prepositions /another volume is forthcoming/ it probably is the first dictionary of English idioms based on solid linguistic analyses of entries.

NOTES

1. For other interpretations of these terms, as well as terms like SET-PHRASE, WORD EQUIVALENT etc. see Amosova, N.N. Osnovy anglijskoj frazeologii. Leningrad: 1963; Arkhangel'skij, V.L., Ustojčivye frazy v sovremennom russkom jazyke : osnovy teorii ustojčivykh fraz i problemy obščej frazeologii, Rostov: 1964; Babkin, A.M. /ed./, Problemy frazeologii, Moskva and Leningrad : 1964; Ginzburg et al. /1966/; Skorupka, S., "Podstawy klasyfikacji jednostek frazeologicznych" in

Doroszewski, W. /ed./ Prace filologiczne. Tom XIX, PWN: Warszawa: 1969; Kunin, A.V., Anglijskaja frazeologija, Moskva: 1970; Arnol'd, I.V., Stilistika sovremennogo anglijskogo jazyka, Leningrad : 1973.

2. Cf. idioms "syntactically not well formed" in Katz and Postal /1964/, Chafe /1968/, and Weinreich /1966/.
3. Note that ^xpour cats and dogs is not acceptable either.
4. With the highest degree of idiomaticity; cf. Weinreich /1966/ and Fraser /1970/.
5. Or in other words, EMPHATIC TRANSFER, as Cowie and Mackin /1975/ have called it, e.g. Down came the snow thick and fast; With these few extra people you can cope easily; but ^xOff took the pilot smoothly.
6. At least one more transformation should be included in this type: RELATIVE. The following examples, cited after Cowie and Mackin /1975:xli, lv/, may illustrate this transformation: The article through which he glanced so quickly ...; Aristocratic connections of which he makes rather too much...; but ^xThe husband at whom Olive gets regulary ... is not acceptable. Besides, in some idioms it is possible to have a clefted noun phrase, e.g. It is your advice that Mary has taken to heart; it was a foregone conclusion that we would leave late /Fraser, /1970:33//.
7. Cf. GRAMMATICAL VALENCY in Ginzburg et al. /1966:89/.
8. Cf. LEXICAL VALENCY in Ginzburg et al. /1966:87/.
9. For instance, while put one's foot in/to/ it is used in both British and American English, drop a brick, which basically means the same, is used only in British English.
10. One cannot, as Godziszewski /Shaggy Dog English, Part 1 & 2, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa, 1973/ does, recommend the learner idioms like as meek as a mouse, out with it, or set your mind at rest old chap for his own practice in conversation.

Their serious use in every-day spoken English might be considered naive, if not ridiculous.

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