



Linguistic Assumptions of Idioms in English and Arabic Languages

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Abstract

This paper presents the underlying linguistic assumptions on the idioms in the English and Arabic languages. It discusses the comparison between the natures of idioms in these language settings. The main objective of this paper is to assist researchers and linguists with the essential similarities and differences of idioms. Also, it discusses the semantic, syntactic and functional classification of idioms. The paper also provides some examples of idioms' use with regards to Arabic and English languages.

Keywords: Linguistics assumptions, Idioms, Arabic, English

INTRODUCTION

This paper displays the linguistics assumptions of idioms for Arabic and English languages. It concentrates on the differences and similarities with regard to idioms in English and Arabic languages. It begins with English idioms and it explains the semantic, syntactic and functional classification of these idioms by providing some examples of their use. Then, it discusses Arabic idioms and it provides some examples of their use. Finally it displays the comparison between English and Arabic idioms.

Idioms in English

There is number of definitions to the term idiom that have resulted different types of idioms. For example, Fernando and Flavell (1981: 19, in Dumitrascu 2007: 2) have explained various types related to the classification of idioms and their classification was based on semantic transparency. Their classification include four types of idioms as explained in the following paragraphs (Fernando and Flavell (1981: 19, in Dumitrascu 2007: 2)

- (1) Transparent idioms, including idioms whose literal and figurative meanings are closely linked to each other and the figurative can be deduced from the literal such as *to cut the wood* and *to break the eggs*. (Fernando and Flavell 1981: 19, in Dumitrascu 2007: 3)

- (2) Semi-transparent idioms, including idioms that have a component that links the literal and a figurative meaning and can be regarded as metaphors, such as *to skate on thin ice* and *to add fuel to the fire*. (Fernando and Flavell 1981: 19, in Dumitrascu 2007: 3).
- (3) Semi-opaque phrases, which are metaphor idioms and are not completely intelligible, such as *to burn one's boats* and *tarred with the same brush* (Fernando and Flavell 1981: 19, in Dumitrascu 2007: 4).
- (4) Opaque phrases, which are full idioms whose literal and figurative meanings are completely different from each other and the meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of the component words, such as *to pull some body's leg* and *to pass the buck* (Fernando and Flavell 1981: 19, in Dumitrascu 2007: 4).

Moreover, Makkai has made a big contribution in this regard and his contribution began with his doctoral research (Makkai, 1965) before it was published as a book in 1972. This contribution marks an important achievement in this field. Makkai classified idioms as lexemic and sememic idioms.

Lexemic Idioms

This type includes several classes as presented in the following classifications:

- (5) Phrasal verbs, such as *make up*, *turn out*, *bring up*, etc.
- (6) Tournures (turn of phrase), such as *fly off the handle*, *rain cats and dogs*, *kick the bucket*, *have it out with somebody*, *be well-off*, etc.
- (7) Irreversible binomials, such as *pepper and salt*, *coffee and cream*, etc.
- (8) Phrasal compounds, such as *hot dog*, *blackmail*, *high-handed*, etc.
- (9) Incorporating verbs, such as *eavesdrop*, *manhandle*, *boot-lick*, etc.
- (10) Pseudo-idioms, such as *kith and kin*, *spic and span*, *to and fro*, etc. (Makkai 1972:135-172).

Sememic Idioms

This type includes the following classes:

- (11) Proverbs, such as, *don't count your chickens before they're hatched*.
- (12) Familiar quotations, such as, *Brevity is the soul of wit*.
- (13) First-base idioms, which is associated with a national game like baseball, such as, *have two strikes against one* and *never to get to first base*.
- (14) Idioms of institutionalised politeness such as (*would you mind? may I...?*), with interrogative intonation, such as *may I ask who's calling?* and for the imperative *identify yourself*.
- (15) Idioms of institutionalised greeting, such as, *how do you do?* and *so long*.
- (16) Idioms of institutionalised understatement, such as *I wasn't too crazy about him*.
- (17) Idioms of institutionalised hyperbole, such as *he won't even lift a finger*. (Makkai 1972:172-179).

In addition, McCarthy (1992:56-7, 1998:130-1 in Grant 2003:24) classified tournure idioms, irreversible binomials idioms, phrasal compound idioms, phrasal verb idioms and supplemented several classes to this categorization as explained in the following:

- (18) Prepositional expressions, such as *in two shakes of a lamb's tale*.
- (19) Frozen similes, such as *keen as mustard*.
- (20) Possessive phrases, such as *a king's ransom*.
- (21) Opaque compounds, such as *a mish-mash*.
- (22) Idiomatic speech routines, gambits and discourse markers, such as *by the way*.
- (23) Restricted collocations, such as *breakneck speed*.
- (24) Cultural allusions, such as *to be or not to be*.

In addition, Alexander (1984, 1987, in Grant 2003: 24) included three other categories of idioms which are listed below:

- (25) Proverbial idioms, such as *the land of Nod*.
- (26) Metaphorical/allusive idioms, such as *a hot potato*.
- (27) Idiomatic similes, such as *bold as brass*.

In addition to the categorization of idioms types, many other linguists present a significant classification of idioms by classifying them into a number of domains, such as semantic, syntax and functional domains.

Semantic Classification of English Idioms

English idioms are classified to six categories with respect to their semantic property. These categories are explained in the following paragraphs.

- (28) Semi-idioms, which include phrases such as *white lie*, *swallow one's pride* and *stir up trouble*, has at least one word that contributes to its literal meaning. These also include other phrases such as *what on earth* and *where in God's name* may also have at least one word that contributes to its literal meaning, but are not necessarily idioms. (Cowie 1981; Newmeyer 1974 & Weinreich 1969, in Grant 2003:25).
- (29) Semi-opaque idioms, where the meaning is not clear but may be possible to guess, such as *keep one's head above water* and *sail too close to the wind*. Other phrases may also have meanings that are possible to guess, such as *chances are* and *how come* but are not necessarily considered idioms. (Fernando Flavell, 1981:19, in Dumitrascu 2007: 2).
- (30) Pseudo idioms, where one of the elements does not make any sense on its own, such as *spic and span* and *kith and kin* (Makkai, 1969). Similarly, other phrases could also contain an element does not make sense in its own, such as *easy-peasy* and *blah blah blah*.

- (31) Pure idioms: Different claims have been made towards the classification of this category, for example, Fernando & Flavell (1981, in Grant 2003) claimed that pure idioms include both literal and a non-literal meaning.

Makkai (1972) describes pure idioms as idioms of decoding. On the other hand, Moon (1998a) describes pure idioms as opaque metaphors, which cannot be understood without referring to the knowledge of the historical source, such as *bite the bullet*, *kick the bucket*, *over the moon* and *red herring*.

- (32) Full idioms, the elements of which contain no formatives whose ordinary lexical meaning contributes to the semantic interpretation, such as *kick the bucket*, *toe the line*, *red herring* and *butter up*. These include other phrases that may also contain no formatives whose ordinary lexical meaning contributes to the semantic interpretation, (e.g. *of course*, *by the way*) but are not necessarily idioms.
- (33) Figurative idioms, a group of expressions which have figurative meanings but which also keep a current literal interpretation, such as *catch fire*, *close ranks* (Cowie et al., 1983). Moon (1998a: 9-19) classified fixed expressions and idioms into transparent metaphors, semitransparent metaphors and opaque metaphors. Examples of transparent metaphors are *alarm bells ring* and *behind someone's back*, examples of semitransparent metaphors are *on an even keel* and *the pecking order* and opaque metaphors include *red herring* and *shoot the breeze*.

Syntactic Classification of English Idioms

Besides the semantic classification of idioms there is another way to classify English idioms this is the syntactic classification of idioms that reflects diverse grammatical categories as follows.

- (34) Syntactic idioms and they are not well-formed, although some grammatical structure is normally evident, such as *by and large* and *far and away* (Cruse, 1986:37-8).
- (35) Phrase patterns and they have four different categories.
- (a) noun phrase, such as *a crashing bore*.
 - (b) adjective phrase, such as *free with one's money*.
 - (c) prepositional phrase, such as *in the nick of time*.
 - (d) adverbial phrase, such as *often as not* (Cowie, 1983: xxix-xxxii).
- (36) Clause patterns that have the following components
- (a) verb + complement, such as *come clean*.
 - (b) verb + direct object, such as *foot the bill*.
 - (c) verb + direct object + complement, such as *bled his family dry*.
 - (d) verb + direct object + adjunct, such as *cast your net wide* (Cowie, 1983: xxix-xxxii).
- (37) Clause/phrase patterns and they include the following identifications

- (a) possessive clause, such as *got a taste of their own medicine*.
- (b) noun phrase, such as *the common touch*.
- (c) adjective phrase, such as *not fit to wash his feet*.
- (d) prepositional phrase, such as *under your own steam*.
- (e) adverbial phrase, such as *none too soon*.
- (f) noun + noun pattern, such as *fair and square* (Cowie, 1983: xxxiii- xxxviii).

(38) Different grammatical types as illustrated below.

- (a) subject + predicator + object, such as *x buries the hatchet*.
- (b) subject + predicator + object + adjunct, such as *x keeps tabs on y*.
- (c) subject + predicator + adjunct, such as *x comes to grief* (Moon, 1998a :85-92).

Functional Classification of English Idioms

English idioms can also be classified according to their functions. Functional classification includes two major categories (Cowie, 1983: xi):

(39) Catchphrase, which is often humorous, such as *Did he fall or was he pushed?*

(40) Saying, which is usually a comment on something, such as *out of sight, out of mind*.

Strassler (1982:116) investigated one function of idioms which is interpersonal relation. He claims that “when using an idiom the speaker conveys more information than its semantic content; he or she either establishes a social hierarchy or he/she tests the hearer’s opinion in this matter.”

Furthermore, Strassler (1982) indicated that idioms deal with personal reference, for example, reference to the first person such as ‘I can’t dance *worth shit*’, reference to a communicative partner, for example, second person, such as ‘I mean, why have you got such a, a sort of a *chip on your shoulder* about it’ and reference to a third person which is most common such as ‘O’Brien is a *ball player*’ or reference to an object such as ‘you try to brush it off the table as being *pie in the sky*’.

On the other hand, Dumitrascu (2007:3) explains that the word idiom refers to all kinds of expressions and provides a ‘top-down’ approach to idioms by classifying four classes of such word groups as indicated below:

- (41) Pure idioms, which include phrases resulting from the process of idiomatization of a fixed word group, such as *kick the bucket*, *blow the gaff*, and *carry coals to Newcastle*;
- (42) Figurative idioms, which are on the border of idioms, hardly allowing any variation, such as *to burn one’s boats*, *to beat one’s breast*, *to go to the dogs* and *to burn the candle at both ends*;
- (43) Restricted collocations or semi-idioms, combine one element with a transferred meaning and one with a literal meaning. Such collocations are possible variants of noun idioms with a certain collocational range, such as *a cardinal error/sin/virtue*;

- (44) Open collocations, which are free or loose syntactic structures with each constituent used in a common literal sense.

Idioms in Arabic

Maxos (2003:4) explained that there is no ready-made source available for collecting Arabic idioms and these idioms are mainly collected from two sources. Firstly, live sources or media such as TV, radio programs, movies and from daily interaction directly. The second source includes written sources, such as newspapers, magazines, novels and books.

It has been anecdotally acknowledged that Arabic idioms have been classified as standard or classical idioms. These classical / standard idioms are shared by all L1 speakers and they are mainly historical idioms found in books and are the traditional heritage of ancient Arabs. Some of these idioms are found in some Quran verses.

Maxos (2003:5-6) has classified Arabic idioms into two main categories: the regular idioms and special idioms in terms of structure and meaning. However, Arabic idioms have special structures and these include the dialogue expressions, narrative expressions and rhetorical questions.

- (45) Dialogue expressions are very common in Arabic. These typically require a formulaic response to a question that is two roles are required. For instance, *bedak alhag wala abin amo* which means 'do you want the truth or something near the truth'. The listener should reply saying *alhag*, ('the truth').
- (46) Narrative expressions, which consist of two to four sentences that make a very short story to give a point. For example, *agool thoor tagool ahleboh* which means ('I tell him it's a bull, he says milk it!'). This means he does not understand what I mean.
- (47) Rhetorical questions are questions that require no answer. These include offensive expressions found in many languages; for example, in the English language there are many expressions that are very useful and colourful but cannot be employed in polite company, such as *he plays like a girl*.

Awwad (1990:58-59) distinguished Arabic idioms into these categories: lexemic, phraseological and proverbial. Arabic Lexemic idioms include verbal, nominal, adjectival and adverbial expressions, for example, *shahm wa nar* which means 'fat and fair'. However, Arabic lexemic idioms do not come with particles, and they are made up of either the verb alone or the verb followed by an adverbial nominal. In addition, phraseological idioms consist of collocational preferences and restrictions, such as *ala eni / rasi* which means 'on my eye / head'. Moreover, proverbial idioms include a proverb, which consists of three main categories. The first type takes the form of abstract statements expressing general truths, such as *alboad yazed algalb wulwan* which means 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. The second type include specific observations from everyday experience to make a point which is general; for instance, *man sara ala aldarbi wasal* which means 'he who takes the first step will eventually achieve his aim'. The third type comprises sayings from particular areas of traditional wisdom and

folklore; for example, the health proverbs such as *mn tasha tmda* which means 'after dinner rest a while'.

Comparison between English and Arabic idioms

From the discussion thus far, English and Arabic idioms have several differences in terms of their types. With regard to the English idioms, several classifications have been proposed and these classifications are varied and their variations depend on different points of view of the researchers. For example, several scholars have classified idioms depending on the nature of idioms (e.g Makkai, 1965 & 1972). Other researchers have made classifications depending on the semantic, syntactic and functional aspects of the structures, (e.g Fernando and Flavell, 1981; Cowie, 1981; Newmeyer, 1974; & Weinreich, 1969). In contrast, Arabic idioms have two major types and these are standard idioms and classical idioms. Moreover, as Maxos (2003) explained there are two categories of Arabic idioms depending on their structure and these categories are the regular idioms and special idioms.

One major difference between English and Arabic idioms is the classification depending on their structures respectively. In terms of semantic intelligibility English idioms include several categories such as semi-idioms, semi-opaque idioms, pseudo idioms, pure idioms, full idioms and figurative idioms. In terms of their syntactic structures English idioms have been classified into many varied categories such as syntactic idioms, phrase patterns, clause patterns, clause/phrase patterns and different grammatical types. In addition, English idioms are classified according to functional structure that is catchphrases and sayings.

The major similarity between English and Arabic idioms as Awwad (1990:58-59) explained is that English idioms can be lexemic, phraseological and proverbial. Furthermore, English lexemic idioms can include verbal (verb + particle combination), nominal, adjectival and adverbial expressions. Arabic idioms can also be lexemic, phraseological and proverbial. Arabic lexemic idioms can also contain verbal, nominal, adjectival and adverbial expressions. However, Arabic verbal lexemic idioms do not occur with particles but Arabic verbal lexemic idioms can occur both with the verb alone such as *daxala albayta* which means 'he entered the house' or the verb followed by an adverbial nominal such as *daxala albayta unwatan* which means 'he entered the house by force'.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented the linguistic assumptions between English and Arabic idioms. It exemplified the argument with detailed comparison in both languages to simplify information for the researchers in the field of idioms. It also, highlighted all the essential topics of the idioms with respect to both languages in terms of semantic, syntax and functional classification.

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