

Alan Healey

ENGLISH IDIOMS¹

Many linguists use the term idiom to refer to any group of words whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual words.² However, some authors, including the present one, prefer a somewhat broader definition which includes groups of morphemes such as compounds.³ For the purpose of this discussion then, an idiom is any group of morphemes or words whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of its parts. For example, broke, blackbird, red herring, give up, kick the bucket, in the doghouse, once in a blue moon, the axe fell, and a stitch in time saves nine are all idioms in this sense.⁴

It is convenient to have a term which includes both idioms and single morphemes, and lexeme is now widely used for this concept.⁵ Hockett's use of idiom for this lexeme concept departs too far from the popular usage of the term idiom to be acceptable.⁶

Some authors seem to avoid the term idiom deliberately,⁷ although few explain why. Palmer and Bongers dislike the term because it is too broad.⁸ Joos complains that the term is too often applied to some difficult expression to avoid describing it.⁹

Idioms present many problems in grammatical analysis, in lexicography, and in language learning and teaching.

Identifying Idioms

Both grammarian and lexicographer need to know exactly what each idiom contains, where it begins and finishes.

The first test we may apply to a suspected idiom is to remove or replace its morphemes one at a time. If such a change does not destroy the idiomatic meaning of the expression, then the morpheme concerned is probably not part of the idiom.¹⁰ For instance, we may suspect Long live the King! of being an idiom, but when we also find Long live the Queen! and Long live President Johnson! we are forced to the conclusion that Long live may be an idiom but the King does not appear to be an essential part of such an idiom. Similarly, when we test he had cold feet we find that he and the past tense suffix -ed are not part of the idiom, since have cold feet still carries the meaning 'be afraid'. However, if any of the four morphemes in this shorter expression are removed or replaced then the remainder no longer carries this meaning and only has its non-idiomatic meaning.

After reducing a suspected idiom to its minimum form by this first test, we may then apply a second test. Take each component morpheme in turn and search for other collocations in which it occurs with the same meaning as it appears to have in this suspected idiom. Often the search is fruitful and the "idiom" disappears, and in the process we have become familiar with one of the less familiar usages of the particular morpheme. For instance, the game darts may be suggested as an idiom in contrast to the ordinary plural darts.¹¹ However, when we remember bowls, quoits, noughts and crosses, snakes and ladders, billiards, dominoes and the like, we are justified in postulating a suffix -s 'game played with Ys' where Y represents the stem which is suffixed, and this suffix is homophonous with the ordinary plural suffix -s. Thus the game darts has a regular structural pattern, clearly identifiable morpheme components, and a fully deducible

meaning. Similarly, one may think of go out as an idiom until one remembers go 'become' in go mad and go red, and out 'extinguished' in put out and be out.

The arbitrary character of darts and go out lies not in their meanings, for these are in fact deducible from the components, but rather it lies in the fact that these forms occur at all. The morphemes -s 'game played with Ys' and out 'extinguished' are quasi-productive and do not occur in all of the collocations that might be reasonably expected of them. Quasi-productive grammatical features constitute a problem in any type of generative grammar,¹² and all of their instances must be listed in a dictionary and specifically learned by children and language students. However, forms containing a quasi-productive morpheme are not on this basis treated as idioms here.¹³ All formations, whether quasi-productive or productive, are classified as idioms or otherwise on essentially semantic grounds.

Internal Structure of Idioms

An idiom might be more carefully defined as a group of two or more morphemes and an equal or greater number of tagmemes whose meaning as a whole is not deducible from the meanings of its component morphemes and tagmemes or any subgrouping thereof.¹⁴ Irrespective of the grammatical model used, structural meaning has to be taken account of in the semantic identification of idioms just as much as in the semantic interpretation of ordinary non-idiomatic utterances.¹⁵

In all the instances examined by the author, the morphemes of an English idiom fill tagmemes which are also part of that idiom. No idiom has been found in which one

of the morphemes is a floating component free to fill any one of many different tagmemes within the context while the remainder of the idiom has no such freedom. But on the other hand, many English idioms include among their components an open tagmeme,¹⁶ The morpheme which fills such an open tagmeme may be any member of a specifiable class, and is part of the context, not part of the idiom. For instance, there are many idioms such as off POSS rocker 'mad' which contain a free POSSessor tagmeme filled by a possessive pronoun agreeing with the subject of the clause in which the idiom occurs. The idiom does not determine which particular possessive pronoun will occur; the context determines that. Thus the idiom includes this Possessor tagmeme (that is, its position within the idiom, its class of pronoun fillers, and its apparent meaning of possessor), but it does not include a particular word such as his.

The morphemes of an idiom often form an unbroken sequence, but not necessarily so. For instance, in off POSS rocker the possessive pronoun which fills the Possessor tagmeme comes between the two words which belong to the idiom. Similarly, the verb and adverbial of transitive verb-adverbial composites (or compound verbs) such as run . . . down 'criticize' may be split apart by a noun phrase or accusative pronoun. All such broken sequences may be termed discontinuous idioms.

The majority of English idioms have an internal structure that is paralleled in ordinary Modern English grammar. Some such as broke 'out of funds' and blackbird are phonologically single words, the first having the shape of a "strong" verb marked for past tense, and the second having morphemes appropriate to a noun phrase, as does red herring 'diversion

of a discussion'. The components of give up 'stop trying' may be interpreted as an intransitive verb and an adverbial in their usual order, while kick the bucket 'die' has all the appearance of a transitive verb followed by a noun phrase as object. In the doghouse 'in disgrace' has the shape of a prepositional phrase, and once in a blue moon has the shape of a frequency adverb closely knit with a prepositional phrase. The axe fell 'the inevitable punishment came' has the shape of an intransitive clause, except that the past tense morpheme is not part of the idiom. A stitch in time saves nine has the shape of a transitive clause. A few idioms contain two or more clauses. In fact, there are few English construction types which are not paralleled by at least a few idioms.

The stress patterns of favourite collocations of words are often modified so as to be more like the stress patterns of single words.¹⁷ For instance, noun phrases such as bad man and printed sign have both components stressed, whereas compounds and fixed phrases such as madman and printed matter have only one component stressed.¹⁸ In forming compounds, collocations of three or more words are usually shortened by deleting the function words and the remaining words are often re-ordered. For instance core of the apple becomes apple core.¹⁹ It should be carefully noted that although many English compounds and fixed phrases are idioms, not all of them are. For example, although broadside 'verbal attack', grey matter 'intelligence' and horsefeathers 'nonsense' are undoubtedly idioms, madman, printed matter and apple core are not idioms despite their being compounds or fixed phrases. Their meanings are easily deduced from their components.

Another type of expression to which the latter remarks

also apply is the verb-adverbial composite. Many such composites are idioms, but not all of them. For example, although think up 'invent' is clearly an idiom, eat up is semantically transparent, with up having the sense of a complete or effectual action as in burn up, tear up and close up. Similarly, do in 'ruin' is an idiom but fence in is not since its meaning can be deduced from the usual meaning of fence and from in with the sense of enclosing or bounding which it has in cover in, wall in and fill in.

It is now appropriate to describe a third way of testing an expression which one suspects of being an idiom. This test is applied after the first and second tests, and is especially useful if the second test is inconclusive because of vague or broad meanings. The test consists of expanding or transforming the expression in as many ways as are semantically sensible and grammatically appropriate to its internal structure in the light of ordinary English grammar. Those expansions and transforms which are unacceptable or which do not maintain the characteristic meaning of the expression provide cumulative evidence that the expression is an idiom. On the other hand, those expansions and transforms which are acceptable and maintain the characteristic meaning of the expression tell us nothing about its idiomatic or non-idiomatic status. However, should the expression prove to be an idiom they will help clarify its syntactic behaviour.

For example, if we apply this test to red herring 'diversion of discussion' we find that the expansions red herrings and my red herring could be used of a verbal distraction, but that very red herring would only be used of a smoked fish, thus pointing to an idiom. Similarly kick the bucket, might kick the bucket, kicked the bucket

and kick the bucket quickly may all refer to dying, but the expansion kick the big bucket and the transform the bucket was kicked could only be used in the sense of physically kicking a real bucket, thus indicating that kick the bucket 'die' is an idiom. Again, the fact that kith and kin 'friends and relatives' is not acceptable when transformed to *kin and kith is evidence that it is an idiom.

Unique Occurrences

A semantically unique occurrence of any kind of element plus the essential (minimal) context in which it occurs are together treated as an idiom. This situation is sometimes met with when one is applying the second test to a suspected idiom that has already been reduced to its minimal form by the first test. If the meaning of the suspected idiom can be deduced from its component morphemes and tagmemes by assuming well established meanings for all of them except one component for which a unique meaning or meaning variant has to be postulated, then our definition of idiom forces us to identify this minimal expression as an idiom. Any present-day "meaning" for such a unique occurrence can only be inferred from the remainder of the expression by assuming that the meanings are additive, and this "meaning" cannot then be used in turn to prove that the meanings are additive. There are at least three types of uniqueness possible.

- (a) Unique allosemes. Each meaning variant or alloseme of a morpheme needs to be attested in at least one other (rather different) context before being invoked to deduce the meaning of a suspected non-idiom. For example, the first test shows that the coast will be clear may be varied

for tense, and its minimal form could be represented as the coast be clear. None of these remaining four morphemes may be removed or replaced without drastically changing the meaning. The second test then shows that the, be and clear seem to have one of their usual meanings but that coast seems to have a unique "alloseme" such as 'opportunity for secrecy or freedom of action'. This unique "alloseme" is not supported by any other occurrence of coast; it occurs only in the context the ... be clear. As this is not regarded as an adequate basis for deducing the meaning of the coast be clear, this expression is regarded as an idiom.²⁰

- (b) Unique morphemes. The meaning of a unique morpheme of necessity occurs only once. The essential context plus the unique morpheme are together treated as an idiom.²¹ For instance, cranberry, kith and kin, and give short shrift to are idioms for this reason.
- (c) Unique occurrences of a tagmeme or semantic variant of a tagmeme, provided that it has a specific filler (not a class of fillers), must be reckoned on as a third source of such idioms. However, because of the unavailability of suitably categorized and exhaustive data, the author has not yet been able to identify examples of such grammatical features with any assurance that they are really unique.

In the light of this treatment of unique items it is necessary to give a brief caution concerning the application of the first test. In our eagerness to strip off all unessential morphemes from a suspected idiom there is a danger of going too far if the meanings are vague or broad. If at any stage we have a "minimal" expression which occurs in only one context, then we have stripped away too much. The invariant (essential) part of the context should be added back on to this expression and together they should be regarded as the idiom.

Semantic and Syntactic Contexts of Idioms

The total or idiomatic meaning of an idiom gives some indication of the likely semantic contexts in which it will occur. If there is a single morpheme or word which is virtually synonymous with the idiom, then the idiom is likely to occur in much the same external collocations as this word while it has that particular meaning. For example, kick the bucket occurs in the same kind of contexts in which die occurs referring to physical death. The lack of a one-word synonym for a particular idiom forces one to make a more careful investigation of its semantic usage, but it does not affect its status as an idiom in any way.

The internal grammatical structure of an idiom gives us some pointers as to the syntactic contexts in which it may be used, but these are by no means conclusive. Syntactic behaviour must be determined separately for each idiom. Some idioms of two or three words behave syntactically like a single word. For instance smell a rat 'be suspicious' functions like an intransitive verb with the

minor qualification that the verb suffixes -ed, -ing,
and -s attach to smell rather than rat.²² The prepositional
phrase in case 'lest' is distributed like a conjunction.
Transitive verb-adverbial composites such as bring ...
up 'rear' function like a transitive verb with the quali-
fication that in the active voice a pronoun object must
come between the verb and adverbial and a noun or noun
phrase may either come there or may follow the adverbial.²³
An idiom for which there is a one-word synonym often behaves
syntactically like that synonym. However, this similarity
may merely be the consequence of the method by which the
synonym was originally selected from among a list of
several possibilities. When we are searching for the best
synonym of a word we tend to select a word of the same class.

The syntactic behaviour of English idioms has
received scant attention from grammarians and lexicographers.
To fill this gap in our understanding of English grammar we
need to examine and classify a large number and variety of
idioms. Only then can we know the extent and nature of the
differences between idiom syntax and ordinary English syntax.

Some Types of English Idioms

The following list provides a small sampling of some
of the commoner types of English idioms. They illustrate
the tremendous variety in the length, internal structure and
syntactic class of idioms.²⁴ The primary classification is in
terms of each idiom's syntactic behaviour in its external
context. Within these groupings the idioms are subgrouped
according to their internal structure. Subsection numbers
with the postscript m list idioms with a miscellany of internal
structures. The identification of these expressions as idioms,

and their classification according to syntactic function and internal structure, is very tentative and requires confirmation by careful testing.

1 Idioms Which Function like Nouns²⁵

- 1.1 blackmail, funnybone, grey matter, dumbbell, broadside, fathead, blackbird;
- 1.2 red tape, best man, white paper, wet blanket, lone wolf, red herring;
- 1.3 bullseye, foolscap, hen's teeth, lion's share, old wives' tale;
- 1.4 bottleneck, bandwagon, hayseed, chickenpox, gooseflesh, horsefeathers;
- 1.5 Dewar flask, Ferris wheel, Pitot tube, Pullman car, Geiger counter;
- 1.6 fishwife, mothball, soap opera, powerhouse;
- 1.7 chicken feed, comfort station, eyewash, greenhouse, handcuff, pocketbook;
- 1.8 brain storm, sea-horse, foothill, wall flower;
- 1.9 breadfruit, dragonfly, eggplant, frogman, honeydew, zebra fish;
- 1.10 bonehead, butterfingers, egghead, razorback, sunflower;
- 1.11 football, handbook, piece work, skyhook, station wagon;
- 1.12 man-of-war, jack-of-all-trades, jack-in-the-box, will-o'-the-wisp;
- 1.13 heartbreak, cloudburst, bear hug, swan-song, landslide;
- 1.14 bodyguard, disc jockey, milkshake, lifeguard, banana split;
- 1.15 daydream, belly flop, homework, lip service, landfall, windfall;
- 1.16 blockbuster, eye opener, householder, skyscraper, pedal pushers;

- 1.17 fence sitter, house breaker, fan dancer, cliff hanger, truck farmer;
- 1.18 blowfly, copycat, crybaby, daredevil, snapdragon, catchcry;
- 1.19 touchstone, sawbones, skinflint, spoilsport, turncoat;
- 1.20m forget-me-not, hand-me-down, ne'er-do-well;
- 1.21 powder room, spyglass, sweatshop, whistle stop;
- 1.22 diehard, speakeasy, speedwell;
- 1.23 castaway, hangover, blowout (=party), showdown, turnround (=time in port);
- 1.24 upstart, upkeep, onset, overcast, offspring;
- 1.25 in-law, outlaw, insight, underdog;
- 1.26m whatnot (=a kind of furniture), so-and-so (=scoundrel), merry-go-round.

2 Idioms Which Function like Noun Phrases of Limited Expandability, Names, and Pronouns

- 2.1 a bolt from the blue, a drop in the bucket, a bundle of nerves, a month of Sundays, a pretty kettle of fish, a shot in the dark;
- 2.2 the cloth (=the clergy), the pill, the upshot, the time (= clock-time at that moment);
- 2.3 the sword of Damocles, the long and the short of it, the middle of nowhere, the morning after the night before, the straw that broke the camel's back;
- 2.4 the Ford Foundation, the Kinsey report, the Marshall Plan, the Oedipus complex, the Hilton (hotel), the Murray (river);
- 2.5 Mother's Day, Cook's River, Wilson's Promontory, Woolworth's store;
- 2.6 Armistice Day, leap year, Bourketown, Smith Street;

- 2.7 Mount Wellington, Lake George, President Johnson, Mrs. Craig;
- 2.8m Joe Blow, John Citizen, so-and-so, what's-his-name;
- 2.9 's kith and kin, 's pride and joy, 's bread and butter (=livelihood);
- 2.10m what-for (=punishment), what's what, one for the road;
- 2.11m yours truly, the author, the writer, your highness, his majesty, his nibs.

3 Idioms Which Function like Adjectives (see also 12 Equational Complement)

- 3.1 dirt cheap, bone-dry, jet black, stone deaf, cocksure;
- 3.2m foot-loose, penny wise, punch-drunk;
- 3.3 soft-hearted, hard-headed, cold-blooded, thick-skinned;
- 3.4m half-hearted, offhanded, hard-bitten, moon-struck;
- 3.5 blue-green, bitter-sweet;
- 3.6 underhand, forthright, outright, outboard, off-colour, uphill;
- 3.7 cutthroat, hangdog, slapstick, singsong, telltale;
- 3.8m out and out, free and easy, up and coming, spick and span, cat and mouse;
- 3.9m hand-to-mouth, run-of-the-mill, down-at-heel (=shabby), good-for-nothing;
- 3.10 devil-of-a, hell-of-a, whale-of-a, scream-of-a;
- 3.11m many a, no end of, a good few, every other, to burn (=galore);
- 3.12m devil-may-care, non-stop;

4 Idioms Which Function like Intensifiers and Precisors²⁶ (contrast 10 miscellaneous Adverbs)

- 4.1m downright, as ... as can be;
- 4.2 kind of, sort of;

4.3m more or less, or so, only too, most (=very), ever so, good and, dreadfully;

5 Idioms Which Function like Prepositions

5.1 by dint of, in spite of, by way of, for the sake of/for ... 's sake, in the light of, in the face of, in the thick of, over ...'s head; (see 6.6)

5.2m in with (=friendly with), as to (=about), such as, apart from, as of (=from ... on);

5.3m concerning, for all (=despite);

6 Idioms Which Function as Adverbs of Manner(see also 7 Time)

6.1 out of hand, at full bore, by Shanks's pony;

6.2 through thick and thin, from A to Z, with might and main, by hook or by crook;

6.3 in a flash, after a fashion, by a hair's breadth;

6.4 on the sly, on the quiet, off the cuff, at the drop of a hat;

6.5 of one's own accord, by the skin of one's teeth, under one's breath;

6.6 behind X's back, under X's nose; (see 5.1)

6.7 like mad, like anything, like fury, like greased lightning, like a ton of bricks;

6.8m as quick as look at you, for all one is/was worth, lickety-split, helter-skelter, pell-mell, flat out (=non-stop), before you could say Jack Robinson;

6.9 hand to mouth, hand over fist, hell for leather, one after another;

7 Idioms Which Function like Adverbs of Time (see also 6 Manner)27

7.1 ages, donkey's years;

- 7.2m any moment, the livelong day;
- 7.3 in the long run, in the same breath, in the nick of time, in two ticks;
- 7.4m in this day and age, in all one's born days, in (less than) no time;
- 7.5 for the time being, for ever and a day, for Xs on end, in half a shake, not ... for many a long day;
- 7.6m at the eleventh hour, on the spur of the moment, in two shakes of a dead lamb's tail, to date;
- 7.7 till the cows come home, since Adam was a boy, when the moon turns to green cheese;
- 7.8 by and by, then and there, here and now;
- 7.9 for good, at once, for keeps, forever;
- 7.10m once upon a time, all in good time.

8 Idioms Which Function like Adverbs of Frequency

- 8.1 now and again, now and then, off and on, day and night, morning, noon and night, X in and X out;
- 8.2m all along, often enough, ever so often, once (and) for all;
- 8.3 once in a while, once in a blue moon.

9 Idioms Which Function like Adverbs of Place

- 9.1 far and wide, here and there, high and low;
- 9.2 at hand, in place, at close quarters, beyond the black stump;
- 9.3m next door, all over, upside down.

10 Idioms Which Function like Adverbs (Miscellaneous) (Contrast 4 Intensifiers and Precisors)

- 10.1m at least, as good as (=nearly), as well, at a stretch (=without stopping), on no account, (not) ... at all, not ... in the least;

10.2m far from, all but, just about.

11 Idioms Which Function like Quasi-Auxiliaries²⁸

- 11.1 make to, go to, get to, stand to, have to;
- 11.2 be going to, be supposed to, be about to;
- 11.3 be to, bid fair to; (no future forms)
- 11.4 would rather, would just as soon, have got to, ought to, used to, had better; (no tense changes).

12 Idioms Which Function like an Equational Complement (see also 3 adjectives)

- 12.1 as mad as a hatter, as cool as a cucumber, as blind as a bat;
- 12.2 as free as the breeze, as dead as the dodo;
- 12.3 as cold as charity, as tough as leather, as dry as dust, as good as gold;
- 12.4 as X as can be, as X as you please, as X as they come;
- 12.5 with it, out to it;
- 12.6 on deck, in clover, in business, under way, of age, off beat, out of sorts, at loggerheads (takes plural subject), in black and white, at sixes and sevens;
- 12.7 under a cloud, up a gumtree (=puzzled), beyond a joke;
- 12.8 in the gun, in the doghouse, in the offing, in the dark, in the family way, under the weather, up the pole, out of the question, on the mat, on the ball, on the up and up, between the devil and the deep blue sea, out of the frying pan into the fire, down in the mouth;
- 12.9 off one's head, out of one's mind, on one's toes, down one's alley, off one's rocker, on one's last legs, in one's element;

- 12.10 on the tip of one's tongue, at the end of one's tether;
- 12.11 under X's thumb, in X's hair, on X's back, at X's beck and call;
- 12.12m all the same to X, not ... much of a X, a far cry from X, hand in glove (with X);
- 12.13m soft in the head, too big for one's boots, tarred with the same brush;
- 12.14 down and out, few and far between;
- 12.15m oneself, beside oneself, to blame, broke, so-so.

13 Idioms Which Function like Intransitive Verbs²⁹

- 13.1 give out (=become exhausted), show up (=appear), look on (=watch);
- 13.2 find fault, take place, mark time, see red, raise Cain, go halves, eat humble pie, have cold feet;
- 13.3 smell a rat, ring a bell, come a cropper, talk a blue streak;
- 13.4 kick the bucket, climb the wall, face the music, pass the buck, hit the hay, toe the line, bury the hatchet, go the whole hog;
- 13.5 do one's block (=lose one's temper), blow one's own trumpet, feather one's nest, wet one's whistle, burn one's bridges (behind one), behave oneself, excell oneself;
- 13.6 shut up shop, go to rack and ruin, go to the pack, go off the deep end, step on the gas, go to pieces;
- 13.7 ride for a fall;
- 13.8 tear one's hair out, keep one's shirt on, make up one's mind;
- 13.9m long live X, have had it, leave no stone unturned;

- 13.10 eat like a horse, swear like a trooper, sell like hot cakes (takes a plural inanimate subject);
- 13.11 carry coals to Newcastle, hit the nail on the head, burn the candle at both ends, have three sheets in the wind (=be drunk);
- 13.12 have other fish to fry, have an axe to grind;
- 13.13 lay it on thick, paint the town red;
- 13.14m rob Peter to pay Paul, have all one's eggs in one basket, make a mountain out of a molehill.

14 Idioms Which Function like Ambitransitive Verbs

- 14.1 cheer ... up, line ... up, wind ... up (=terminate), shut ... up (=be silent), blow ... up;
- 14.2 pull through (=recover), knock off (=stop); (these have no passive)
- 14.3 give up (=stop trying);
- 14.4 fight ... tooth and nail;
- 14.5 get on (with) (=fare), make out (with), fall out (with), carry on (with) (=misbehave), get away (with), be through (with); (these have no passives)
- 14.6m give in (to), own up (to), catch on (to) (=understand), run out (of) (=become exhausted), look out (for), let on (that); (these have no passives).

15 Idioms Which Function like Transitive Verbs

- 15.1 look after, look into, run up (=accumulate);
- 15.2 come across (=discover), run across (=meet), swear by (=praise), look for, pinch-hit for, hit on (=think of), make up (=put cosmetics on); (these have no passives)
- 15.3 bring ... up (=mention, rear), rattle ... up (=collect), show ... up (=expose), break ... in (=tame),

- bring ... about, gloss ... over, beat ... off,
 carry ... off (=achieve), knock ... off (=steal);
- 15.4 look ... up (=visit), think ... up, make ... out
 (=understand), have ... on (=tease), rattle ... off,
 give ... away (=stop);
 (these have no passives)
- 15.5 do away with;
- 15.6 come across with (=provide), put up with, look on
 with (=work from the same schoolbook as), go through
 with, come up with (=think of), get on with (=proceed
 with); (these have no passives)
- 15.7 point out that, make out that (=pretend that); (these
 have no passives)
- 15.8 tongue-lash, ear-bash, white-wash, ear-mark;
- 15.9 gate-crash; (has no passive)
- 15.10 overlook, undertake, outstrip, intone, instill,
 overcome, overhaul, override;
- 15.11 undergo; (has no passive)
- 15.12 tar and feather;
- 15.13 give X the cold shoulder, throw X a curve, give X
 the once over;
- 15.14 have a stab at, come to grips with, have a bone to
 pick with, get to the bottom of; (these have no
 passives)
- 15.15 pull X's leg, tread on X's toes; (these have no
 passives)
- 15.16 put it down to;
- 15.17 play havoc with, rub noses with, cross swords with,
 play second fiddle to, make a beeline for, do a line
 with (=have as girlfriend), give short shrift to, make
 the most of, have (got) it in for, ring the changes on,
 go to town on (=tread enthusiastically), can't make

head nor tail of; (these have no passives)

15.18 cut X down to size, leave X out in the cold, catch X on the hop, keep X at arm's length;

15.19 take X upon oneself (has no passive).

16 Idioms Which Function like Optionally Ditransitive Verbs

16.1 shell ... out (to), palm ... off (onto), take ... down (for) (=cheat), make ... up (with) (=be reconciled).

17 Idioms Which Function like a Clause without Tense

17.1m it (will) rain cats and dogs, the coast (will) be clear, the axe (will) fall.

18 Idioms Which Function like a Complete Clause

18.1m all the more the merrier, time will tell, the penny dropped, there are no flies on X.

19 Idioms Which Function like Sentence Introducers³⁰

19.1 after all, of course, in practice, by rights;

19.2 by the way, by the bye, by the same token, in the end, in the long run, in the first place, in the last analysis, for that matter, at the same time, on the one hand, on the other hand, in any case, between you and me, as for X;

19.3 as likely as not, as a matter of fact, as it is, as things stand, as Xs go;

19.4 (and) what is more, be that as it may, when it is all boiled down, when it comes to that, when all (is) said and done;

19.5m just the same, all the same, even so, no doubt, by and large, nevertheless, like fun (=definitely not), besides;

19.6m how about ... -ing, why don't (=polite imperative),
I daresay, I guess (that), I suppose (that).

20 Idioms Which Function like Conjunctions

20.1m in case, in order (not) to, on the offchance that;

20.2m so long as, as long as, as soon as, (in) so far as;

20.3m in that, seeing (that), so as (not) to.

21 Idioms Which Function like Sentences

21.1m Good morning. How do you do? Fine, thanks.
Goodbye. Thank you.

21.2m Come off it! Go (and) jump in the lake! Tell
that to the marines! Don't tell me! You can
say that again! I'll say! Nothing doing!
Fancy that! Take it easy! I should think so!

21.3m When in Rome do as Rome does. A stitch in time
saves nine. Pride goeth before a fall. A rolling
stone gathers no moss. Out of sight out of mind.

Even a casual glance at the idioms listed above would suggest that many of them came to be idioms through specialization, extension, and other changes of meaning that are well known from historical studies. First of all, an expression involving well established morphemes, tagmemes, and lexical collocations (e.g. cross swords with, a bolt from the blue, as mad as a hatter) is used figuratively on some memorable occasion.³¹ Its use in such an unusual situation or context catches on, and soon the figure of speech becomes fixed by frequent usage, and at this point it may be considered established as an idiom.³² On the other hand, some idioms such as now and again seem to have developed without a figurative usage, first by fixation through frequent use followed later by a gradual change of

meaning. A few idioms have acquired their unexpected meaning as a result of changes in the culture and values of the speakers of the language, as in Sunday. Some favourite collocations outlive the patterns by which they were originally formed, and consequently contain unique morphemes, collocations or constructions, as in high dudgeon, come wind come weather, and handsome is that handsome does. Some idioms last so long that the component morphemes are no longer recognized and the form is regarded as mono-morphemic. For instance drench actually was a causative form of drink in Old English.

It is true that careful historical research, far more than the kind of guessing indulged in above, can often throw light on how idioms originated and developed, and this is an important field of study in its own right. However, the focus of this paper is the synchronic examination of how idioms function in the present-day language. The average English speaker does not know the history of the idioms he uses, and although at times he may guess at or wonder about some expressions such as chickenpox, even these are usually used without any such thoughts. The present-day meaning and syntactic class of an idiom can be fully ascertained by examining its use in the present-day language without recourse to diachronic studies.

The range of grammatical classifications suggested above for English idioms has one significant gap. Although there are many instances of idioms formed from a verb and an object, with the subject remaining as part of the idiom's context, yet no instances have been listed of an idiom formed from a subject and a verb, with the object remaining as part of the context. There are of course many idioms which

include a subject, but these function as complete clauses or as clause-without-tense. Thus it would appear that in the process of forming English idioms, if any part of a transitive clause structure is used which excludes the subject then the idiom continues to function as subjectless, and if the subject is included then the idiom functions virtually as a complete clause. This would seem to support the traditional view of English clause structure presented in school grammars and followed by IC analysts and transformationalists. That is, that the primary division of the transitive clause is a binary one into subject and predicate, and only after this is the predicate divided into verb, object, and various other elements. The tagmemic view of English clauses which cuts a transitive clause into several tagmemes simultaneously, and which ranks the subject, predicate (verb), and object equally, is not supported by the ways in which clauses are segmented during the formation of English idioms.³³

Idioms as Linguistic Units

The definition of idiom adopted here may give the impression that it is a purely semantic unit, but this is not so.

- (1) Each idiom has a definite form, consisting of an integral number of morphemes and tagmemes. However, despite its complex composition, each idiom is nevertheless a minimum meaningful form in the sense discussed under the first test.
- (2) Idioms may have variant forms comparable to allomorphs, for instance for the sake of and for ... 's sake. Also, many idioms have two or more meanings, and it is not always easy to decide

whether these are alloemes or whether two homophonous idioms should be postulated. For example bring . . . up 'mention', 'vomit', 'rear' is comparable in its range of meanings to run 'hurry', 'spread', 'manage'.

- (3) Each idiom contrasts with all other linguistic forms in either form or meaning or both.
- (4) Although idioms as a whole are not a single grammatical class, yet each individual idiom does belong to some particular grammatical class on the basis of its syntactic behaviour. An idiom may have membership in two or more classes. For instance, makeup 'cosmetics' is a noun and make up 'apply cosmetics to' is a transitive verb.

Thus the idiom is a structural unit very similar in its general properties to the morpheme, differing from it mainly in the type (level) of internal complexity.³⁴

Many idioms have an internal structure which is found in ordinary grammar and a collocation of morphemes which are semantically compatible. For each of these idioms there is another completely homophonous expression, a non-idiom, whose meaning is thoroughly deducible from those of the components. Thus red herring 'diversion' is an idiom and red herring 'herring that is red (due to smoking)' is a non-idiom. Such pairs of homophonous expressions contrast in up to four ways.

- (a) Their meanings are different; one is idiomatic and the other is non-idiomatic (literal).
- (b) They occur in at least partly different contexts, that is, they collate with at least some different lexical items.

- (c) They may belong to different syntactic classes; their syntactic behaviours within their contexts may differ.
- (d) They may differ in the expansions and transformations which they undergo, the idiom usually being more limited than the non-idiom.

Idioms and Dictionary Making

Several problems face the lexicographer as to how to incorporate idioms into a dictionary.³⁵ And these are not small problems, as he may well be faced with twice as many idioms as there are main entries.

- (a) There is a need to indicate clearly how much actually belongs to the idiom and how much is context. In letterpress productions italics may be used for the idiom, and in typewritten materials idioms may be fully capitalized.
- (b) It is important to indicate any open tagmemes which belong to the idiom. It is usual to use one or one's to indicate a tagmeme that is filled by a pronoun which agrees with the subject, and to use somebody, someone, somebody's, someone's, something and somewhere or abbreviations thereof to indicate other tagmemes. However, the obligatory object of an idiom which functions like a transitive verb which might be considered an open tagmeme within the idiom, is often indicated by a transitivity symbol rather than by the generic terms listed above.
- (c) Just as with single words, it is necessary to indicate the kind of words with which an idiom typically collocates. These must be formally distinguished

from the idiom and any words which indicate open tagmemes. Square brackets are sometimes used to indicate typical collocations.

- (d) It is important to indicate systematically the syntactic class of all idioms. Most dictionaries fail badly at this point in that they usually indicate the class for only the one-word idioms,³⁶ although some dictionaries do provide clues as to the syntactic class of longer idioms with carefully chosen examples of usage.
- (e) Some indication of meaning should be given for all idioms. Something more than a single example is needed. In fact, the gloss should be as carefully worded as that of each of the main one-word entries. The lexicographer has to be very careful to examine the usage of an idiom in formulating the gloss. The tendency to rationalize away the meaning of the idiom as a mere extension or specialization of the meaning of the homophonous non-idiom is dangerous. It may lead to an inaccurate gloss for the idiom, or even to an assumption of complete semantic transparency and no gloss at all.
- (f) In bilingual dictionaries there is a tendency to always give an idiom as a gloss for an idiom for the sake of a rather illusory style equivalence, but this policy sometimes results in glosses that are either obsolescent or just not semantically equivalent. That gloss which gives the most accurate denotation and connotation is to be preferred, whether it is a single-word synonym, a multi-word idiom as synonym, or a lengthy explanation.

- (g) Idioms may be alphabetized under their first word or their first word which belongs to a major word-class. In a bilingual dictionary there is some advantage to the user if each idiom is alphabetized under each major word-class word which it contains. However this enlarges the dictionary very considerably. Any impressionistic policy which operates by alphabetizing under the most important word, or under two or more important words, puts the almost intolerable strain on the lexicographer of deciding afresh for each idiom what is the most "important" word or words.

Learning and Teaching Idioms

Each person learning his own or another language has to recognize the existence of idioms just as much as he has to recognize new meanings to familiar words. He is constantly hearing utterances with unexpected meanings. Sometimes they contain completely new words, but often the words are quite familiar. By questioning or observation he determines which word is being used in a new sense, or whether there is some group of words that is the source of the unexpected meaning. If it is an idiom he goes on to clarify how much of the utterance constitutes the idiom, what it means, and how it is usually used.

Consequently, the foreign language teacher has to be alert to his students' unfamiliarity with idioms, and he should specifically teach those which do not fully parallel idioms in the students' mother tongue.³⁷ Good textbooks for teaching a second language to speakers of another

specific language cater for this need (as do bilingual dictionaries), but in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea the situation is rather different. The students in the schools have a wide variety of mother tongues and usually these are completely unknown to the teacher. The teacher of English in this country must assume, therefore, that all English idioms are as unintelligible as new words. They require as much teaching, practice in context, and learning as individual words. They also require graded introduction, but usually only after the words and patterns which comprise them have been introduced.³⁸

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Robert Livingston. 1966. The Verb System of Present-day American English. The Hague. Mouton.
- Bar-Hillel, Y. 1955. "Idioms." In: W.N. Locke and A.D. Booth (eds.), Machine Translation of Languages. (Cambridge. Technology Press, M.I.T.) New York. Wiley. Pp. 183-193. . . .
Also in: Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, Language and Information. Reading, Massachusetts. Addison-Wesley. 1964. Pp. 47-55.
- Bloomfield, Leonard. 1933. Language. New York. Holt.
- Bongers, H. 1947. The History and Principles of Vocabulary Control. Parts I, II, and III in 2 volumes. Woerden, Holland.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1965. Aspects of the Theory of Syntax. Cambridge. M.I.T. Press.
- Coates, William Ames. 1964. "Meaning in Morphemes and Compound Lexical Units." In: Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Linguists. The Hague. Mouton. Pp. 1046-1051.
- Conklin, Harold C. 1962. "Lexicographical Treatment of Folk Taxonomies." In: Fred W. Householder and Sol Saporta (eds.), Problems in Lexicography, Publication 21 of the Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics. Baltimore. Pp. 119-141.
- Cowan, George M. 1965. Some Aspects of the Lexical Structure of a Mazatec Historical Text. Publication Number 11 of the Summer Institute of Linguistics

Publications in Linguistics and Related Fields.

Norman.

- Dostert, Leon E. 1962. "Semi-structural Approach to Meaning: En in French." In: Report of the Eleventh Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies. Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics Number 13. Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Press. Pp. 29-40.
- Franklin, Harry B., Herbert G. Meikle, and Jeris E. Strain. 1964. An Intensive Course in English: Vocabulary in Context. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press.
- Fries, Charles C. 1958. "Preparation of Teaching Materials, Practical Grammars, and Dictionaries, Especially for Foreign Languages." Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Linguists. University of Oslo Press. Pp. 738-746. Also in: Language Learning 9.43-50 (1959).
- Garey, Howard B. 1955. "The Historical Development of Tenses From Late Latin to Old French." Language Dissertation No.51. Baltimore.
- Goodenough, Ward H. 1956. "Componential Analysis and the Study of Meaning." Language 32.195-216.
- Hill, Archibald A. 1958. Introduction to Linguistic Structures: From Sound to Sentence in English, New York. Harcourt, Brace.
- Hill, L.A. 1957. "'Compounds" and the Practical Teacher." English Language Teaching 12.13-21. Also in: Harold B. Allen (ed.), Teaching English as a Second Language: A Book of Readings. New York. McGraw-Hill. 1965. Pp.228-236.

- Hockett, Charles F. 1956. "Idiom Formation." In: Halle et al., For Roman Jakobson. The Hague. Mouton. Pp.222-229.
Also revised version in: Charles F. Hockett, A Course in Modern Linguistics. New York. MacMillan. 1958. Pp.171-3, 303-318.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1924. The Philosophy of Grammar. London. Allen and Unwin.
- Joos, Martin. 1964. The English Verb: Form and Meanings. Madison. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Jorden, Eleanor Harz. 1955. "The Syntax of Modern Colloquial Japanese." Language Dissertation No. 52. Baltimore.
- Katz, Jerrold J. and Paul M. Postal. 1963. Semantic Interpretation of Idioms and Sentences Containing Them.
M.I.T. Research Laboratory of Electronics Quarterly Progress Report No. 70. Pp. 275-282.
- Lado, Robert. 1955. "Patterns of Difficulty in Vocabulary." Language Learning 6.23-41. Reprinted in: Selected Articles From Language Learning Number 2. 1963.
Also in: Harold B. Allen (ed.), Teaching English as a Second Language: A Book of Readings. New York. McGraw-Hill. 1965. Pp. 208-221.
- Lamb, Sydney M. 1964. "The Sememic Approach to Structural Semantics." In: A. Kimball Romney and Roy Goodwin D'Andrade (Eds.), Structural Semantics: Transcultural Studies in Cognition. American Anthropologist Special Publication. Pp. 57-78.
- Lamb, Sydney M. 1966. Outline of Stratificational Grammar. Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Press.

- Lees, Robert B. 1960. The Grammar of English Nominalizations. Publication 12 of the Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics. Baltimore.
- Liem, Nguyen Dang. 1966. English Grammar: A Combined Tagmemic and Transformational Approach (A Contrastive Analysis of English and Vietnamese, Volume 1). Linguistic Circle of Canberra Publications, Series C - Books, No. 3.
- Longacre, Robert E. 1964. "Prolegomena to Lexical Structure." Linguistics 5.5-24.
- Newman, Stanley. 1954. "Semantic Problems in Grammatical Systems and Lexemes: A Search for Method." In: Harry Hoijer (ed.), Language in Culture. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 82-91.
- Nida, Eugene A. 1951. "A System for the Description of Semantic Elements." Word 7.1-14.
- 1958. "Analysis of Meaning and Dictionary Making." International Journal of American Linguistics 24.279-292.
- 1964. Toward a Science of Translating with Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating. Leiden. Brill.
- 1966. A Synopsis of English Syntax, Second Revised Edition. The Hague. Mouton.
- Ota, Akira. 1965. "Review of: The English Verb: Form and Meaning, by Martin Joos." Language 41.657-674.
- Palmer, Harold E. 1938. A Grammar of English Words. London. Longmans.
- Pei, Mario. 1964. Glossary of Linguistic Terminology. New York. Columbia University Press.
- Pike, Kenneth L. 1961. "Compound Affixes in Ocaina." Language 37.570-581.

- 1967. Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behaviour. Second, Revised Edition. The Hague. Mouton.
- Roget's International Thesaurus, Third Edition. 1962. London. Collins.
- Stageberg, Norman C. 1966. An Introductory English Grammar. New York. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Swadesh, Morris. 1946. "Chitimacha." In: Harry Hoijer et al., Linguistic Structures of Native America, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology Number Six. New York. Pp. 312-336.
- Sweet, Henry. 1899. The Practical Study of Languages. Reprinted 1964. London. Oxford University Press.
- Treble, H.A. and G.H. Vallins. 1936. An ABC of English Usage. Oxford. Clarendon Press.
- Weinreich, Uriel. 1963a. "On the Semantic Structure of Language." In: Joseph H. Greenberg (ed.), Universals of Language. Cambridge. M.I.T. Press. Second Edition, 1966. Pp. 142-216.
- 1963b. "Lexicology." In: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Current Trends in Linguistics, Volume 1: Soviet and East European Linguistics. The Hague. Mouton. Pp. 60-93.
- 1964. "Webster's Third: A Critique of its Semantics." International Journal of American Linguistics 30.405-409.
- 1966. "Explorations in Semantic Theory." In: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Current Trends in Linguistics, Volume 3: Theoretical Foundations. The Hague. Mouton. Pp. 395-477.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The author's interest in idioms developed while studying the Telefol language of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. In an attempt to discover which features of Telefol idioms are to be found in other languages, a separate study of English idioms was begun. This paper gives some of the preliminary results for English (many of which also seem to apply to Telefol). An earlier draft of this paper was read at a meeting of Kivung, the Linguistic Society of the University of Papua and New Guinea, on 30th January, 1968. I am indebted to E.H. Flint and Andras Balint for many helpful comments and for bringing several references to my attention.

² For instance, Sweet (1899:139) says "the meaning of each idiom is an isolated fact which cannot be inferred from the meaning of the words of which the idiom is made up." A similar viewpoint is found in Bar-Hillel 1955, Cowan 1965: 83, Fries 1958:743, Katz and Postal 1963, Nida 1951, 1958: 286-7, 1964:237-8, Pei 1966:119, and Treble and Vallins 1936:94-6, 145-7. This concept of idiom has also been called lexical cluster (Anthony, in Pei 1966:146), (semantically exocentric expression (Lees 1960:128, 150, 156, Nida 1951: 12-13, 1964:237), collocations [not to be confused with Firth's use of collocation]) and phrases (Palmer 1938:iv, x-xi), frozen collocation (Cowan 1965:96), formula (Nida 1966: 121 footnote 46) and locution (Liem 1966:125).

³ L.A. Hill 1957:18, Pike 1961:579-581, 1967:427, Weinreich 1963a:181-4, 1966:450-5. This broader concept of idiom has also been called formula (Jespersen 1924:18-24, composite lexeme (Swadesh 1946:335, Lamb 1964:68), compound

lexical unit (Coates 1964:1050), composite realization in the sememic sign pattern (Lamb 1966:31), and specialized hypermorpheme (Pike 1967:427).

⁴The idioms used as illustrations come from British, American, and Australian English. Should any of them be unfamiliar to the reader he may readily substitute others of a similar type.

⁵It has been used in approximately this sense by Allen 1966:100, Conklin 1962:121, Garey 1955:11, Goodenough 1956:208, Jordan 1955:8, Longacre 1964:16, Newman 1954:182, Pike 1967:431, Swadesh 1946:320, 335-6, and Weinreich 1963a:182. Coates (1964:1046, 1050) uses lexical unit in a similar sense.

⁶For instance, the second definition of idiom in Webster's Third International Dictionary reads "an expression established in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in grammatical construction or in having a meaning that cannot be derived as a whole from the conjoined meanings of its elements." A single morpheme cannot be said to contain conjoined meaningful elements. Hockett 1956:222, 1958:172.

⁷For instance Jespersen 1924, Bloomfield 1933 and Palmer 1938.

⁸Palmer 1938:xii, Bongers 1947:241.

⁹Joos 1964:135.

¹⁰This test has been described by Jespersen 1924:19-20.

¹¹Hockett 1956:226, 1958:309, and several other authors quoting him.

¹²Chomsky 1965:148-192.

13

Hockett (1956:225, 1958:307-9) and Weinreich (1966:450) also take this position explicitly. Jespersen (1924:20-22) and Katz and Postal (1963) have treated quasi-productive formations as idioms.

14

Tagmeme is used here for Longacre's grammatical tagmeme and thus includes both Pike's tagmeme and hypertagmeme (Pike 1967:432 footnote 1, Longacre 1964).

15

This necessity has been recognized explicitly by Bar-Hillel (1955), Conklin (1962:121), Pike (1967:427), Weinreich (1966:410, 450), and the Shorter Oxford Dictionary whose third definition reads in part "a peculiarity of phraseology approved by usage, and often having a meaning other than its grammatical or logical one." It also seems to be implied by Hockett (1956:222, 1958:172) in his use of the term structure in defining idiom (our lexeme).

16

Weinreich (1966:453-4) has also discussed this type of idiom and calls the open tagmeme a free slot.

17

For details of these stress changes see L.A. Hill 1957 and Lees 1960:113-179.

18

This statement assumes only phonemic stress and unstress. Compound is used in Bloomfield's sense: Bloomfield 1933:227-9, L.A. Hill 1957:228-9. For fixed phrase see A.A. Hill 1958:126-9.

19

The detailed rules for forming English compound nouns are given in Lees 1960:113-179.

20

In discussing this problem in terms of the complementarity of polysemy and idiomaticity, Weinreich (1963:182) prefers the opposite solution, that is, to allow a uniquely occurring alloeme of a morpheme to be used in deducing the meaning of an expression so as to avoid postulating a 'unilateral idiom.'

²¹ Coates (1964:1050) also seems to regard these as idioms.

²² Weinreich (1966:454) also indicates some of the transforms applicable to this type of idiom.

²³ Stageberg (1966:221-6) gives some other syntactic properties of this type of idiom. Notice that ... is used to indicate a discontinuous idiom.

²⁴ One variety of idiom not yet observed in English but found in several other languages is the compound affix. See Pike 1961.

²⁵ The majority of the examples listed in 1.1-1.11, 1.13-1.19, 1.21 and 2.4-2.7 are selected from Lees 1960, but the subsections are not his.

²⁶ These terms are taken from Liem (1966:124, 126) in place of the more traditional adverbs of degree.

²⁷ Many of the examples listed in sections 7 and 8 were selected from Roget 1962 sections 105-138, 150-1 and 178-219.

²⁸ This term is taken from Joos (1964:20-1). See also Allen 1966:258 and Ota 1965:672-3.

²⁹ Many types of Verb-Adverbial Composite and/or Verb with Prepositional Object have been included in sections 13-16. The grammatical properties of these structures need much more study. A few suggestions are to be found in Stageberg 1966: 219-226. Many other idioms in these sections have an obligatory possessor. Where this possessor agrees with the subject it is written as one's and treated as not affecting transitivity. However, where it is different from the subject it is written X's and treated as an effective object, despite Weinreich's objection to this analysis (1966:453-4).

³⁰ This term is derived from Liem 1966. Many of these

examples may also be used as adverbs or conjunctions in non-initial positions, often with rather different meanings.

³¹ Hockett 1956, 1958:303-9.

³² Such a figurative idiom is termed a cliché when used excessively or inappropriately.

³³ Liem 1966 gives a tagmemic view of English.

³⁴ This parallelism is utilized in the lexeme concept. See especially Hockett's definition of his "idiom" (1956:222, 1958:172). Pike (1967:586) has also emphasized the structural nature of idioms.

³⁵ Several of these problems are discussed in Fries 1968 and Nida 1958.

³⁶ It is to Roget's (1962) credit that he gives a rough classification of all the idioms, both short and long, contained in his thesaurus.

³⁷ The matter of "bilingual idioms" is discussed by Bar-Hillel 1955, Dostert 1962, and Lado 1955:37.

³⁸ For the graded introduction of Verb-Adverbial Composites see Franklin et al. 1964.