CHAPTER 2

THE NATURE AND CLASSIFICATION OF IDIOMS

CONTENTS:

2.1. INTRODUCTION

  2.1.1. SOURCES OF IDIOMS
  2.1.2. CATEGORIZING IDIOMS
  2.1.3. SOME ASPECTS OF AN IDIOM
  2.1.4. ON THE DEFINITION OF IDIOMS

2.2. CLASSIFICATION BASED ON THE NATURE OF IDIOMS

  2.2.1. CLASSIFICATION OF IDIOMS IN LITERATURE
  2.2.2. CLASSIFICATION OF IDIOMS UNDER VARIOUS DOMAINS
  2.2.3. OTHER CLASSIFICATIONS

2.3. CONCLUSION
2.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the further exploration of idioms, their nature and classifications. This chapter is in continuation of the earlier chapter in order to study the idioms in a broad spectrum. It is an effort to understand its characteristics, identify a particular idiom and to come up with a definition.

Generally idioms are often mistaken with many other language usages such as proverbs, collocations, etc.

2.1.1. SOURCES OF IDIOMS

Investigations into the origin of idioms have thrown light not only on their etymology but on their structural status. The sources of their origin indicate their deeper association with the domain of usage. This is exactly parallel to the special vocabulary characteristic of a specific domain. It is well known that only a small percentage of words from the vocabulary of the specialized domain make into general language, among idioms too only a small set of them spread to the general language from their domain of origin. In this process so called idiomatic constructs lose their literal sense and acquire idiosyncratic sense and become opaque. This observation supports that idioms are semantically word like units but structurally syntactic units.

There are many different sources of idioms. The most important thing about idioms is their meaning. This is why a native speaker does not notice that an idiom is incorrect grammatically. If the source of an idiom is known, it is sometimes easier to imagine its meaning. Many idiomatic phrases come from home-life, e.g., to be born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth, to make a clean sweep of something, to hit the nail on the head. There are many which have to do with food and cooking, e.g., to eat humble pie, out of the frying-pan into the fire, to be in the soup. Agrarian society has given rise to go to seed, to put one’s hand to the plough, to lead someone up the garden path. Nautical life and military life are the source of when one’s ship comes home, to be in the same boat as
someone, to be in deep waters, to sail under false colors, to cross swords with someone, to fight a pitched battle, to fight a losing/winning battle.

2.1.2. CATEGORIZING IDIOMS

- Idioms take many different forms or structures. They can be very short or rather long. A large number of idioms consist of some combination of noun and adjective, e.g., cold war, a dark horse, French leave, forty winks, a snake in the grass. Some idioms are much longer: to fish in troubled waters, to take the bull by the horns, to cut one’s coat according to one’s cloth.

- An idiom can have a regular structure, an irregular or even a grammatically incorrect structure. The idiom I am good friends with him is irregular or illogical in its grammatical structure. I is singular; why then is the correct form in this case not I am a good friend with him? This form is impossible although it is more logical; one would have to say: I am a good friend of his. This is, therefore, an example of the kind of idiom where the form is irregular but the meaning clear.

- A second kind has a regular form but a meaning that is not transparent. To have a bee in one’s bonnet has a regular form, but its meaning is not obvious. It means, in fact, that one is obsessed by an idea.

- There is a third group, in which both form and meaning are irregular. To be at large: the form Verb + Preposition + Adjective without noun is strange. If we talk about a prisoner who is (still) at large, it means that he is still free. Here are similar examples: to go through thick and thin, to be at daggers drawn, to be in the swim.

Most idioms belong to the second group, where the form is regular, but the meaning is idiosyncratic. However, even in this group, some idioms are less opaque than others, that is, some are easier to guess than others. Take the example, to give someone the green
light. We can guess the meaning even though we may never have heard it before. If we associate ‘the green light’ with traffic lights where green means ‘Go!’, we can imagine that the idiom means ‘to give someone permission to start something’. This could be an instance of an idiom inside an idiom. Therefore, knowledge of a common idiom makes the complex idiom less opaque.

Other idioms can be guessed if we hear them in context, that is, when we know how they are used in a particular situation. For example, let us take the idiom to be at the top of the tree. If we hear the sentence ‘John is at the top of the tree now’, we are not sure what this is saying about John. Perhaps it means that he is in a higher position or that he is hiding. But if we hear the phrase in context, the meaning becomes clear to us. The idiom means ‘to be at the top of one’s profession, to be successful’.

However, some idioms are too difficult to guess correctly because they have no association with the original meaning of the individual words. Here are some examples: to tell someone where to get off, to bring the house down, to take it out on someone. The learner will have great difficulty here unless he has heard the idioms before. Even when they are used in context, it is not easy to detect the meaning exactly. To get off usually appears together with bus or bicycle.

It was said earlier that we have to learn an idiom as a whole because we often cannot change any part of it. The idioms that cannot be changed at all are called fixed idioms. Some idioms are fixed in some of their parts but not in others. Some idioms allow only limited changes in the parts that are not fixed. Take the idiom to give someone the cold shoulder. The idiom means ‘to treat someone in a cold or unfriendly way’. If we say to give someone the ‘cool’ or ‘warm’ shoulder or to give someone ‘a’ cold shoulder or to give a cold shoulder ‘to’ someone, then none of these are possibly idioms. Therefore, To give someone the cold shoulder is a fixed idiom. Here are some more: to make a clean breast of it, which means ‘to tell the truth about something’. We can only change the tense of the verb. The idiom to take/ have/enjoy forty winks allows a limited choice of verbs but the pair forty winks is fixed. We cannot say ‘fifty’ winks. One cannot explain
why this is wrong. We must accept the idiomatic peculiarities of the language and learn
to handle them. Here are some more examples of idioms that are not fixed in all parts: to
come to a bad/nasty/sticky/no good/untimely end; to keep a
sharp/careful/watchful/professional eye on someone.

2.1.3. SOME ASPECTS OF AN IDIOM

☐ Another important characteristic of idiom is their use that is absolutely optional
paralleling derivational vocabulary. One can choose either to use or to omit them.
Since the use of idioms is not obligatory and their structure is complex, they tend
to remain special objects in the language.

☐ An idiom is a number of words which, taken together, mean something different
from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone. The way in which
the words are put together is often odd, illogical or even grammatically incorrect.

☐ Other idioms are completely regular and logical in their grammar and vocabulary.
Because of the special features of some idioms, we have to learn the idiom as a
whole and we often cannot change any part of it (except perhaps, only the tense of
the verb.

☐ The idiom has been fixed by long usage – as is sometimes seen from the
vocabulary.

For Example:

The idiom to buy a pig in a poke means ‘to buy something which one has not inspected
previously and which is worth less than one paid for it’. Poke in the sense of ‘to look at
carefully’ (besides other senses) only appears in present-day English with this meaning in
this idiom. Therefore, it is clear that the idiom has continued to be used long after the loss
of such sense.
2.1.5. **ON THE DEFINITION OF IDIOMS**

According to Wood, every language has certain phrases or constructions which, if taken literally, would be meaningless, or which by the normal rules of grammar or syntax are quite inexplicable. No native has the least difficulty in understanding them and they are so much a part of his daily speech that in all probability he has never noticed that there is anything irregular or peculiar about them. Such phrases are called Idioms. (Wood 1969).

Idioms are described variously as in the following:

- “An idiom is a combination of two or more words which function as a unit of meaning…. Idiomatic expressions are units of meaning, non-idiomatic expressions, conversely, are made up of distinct meaningful parts”. (Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English Vol.-I P. VIII - IX , 1984)

- “…groups of words with set meanings that can not be calculated by adding up the separate meanings of the parts” –(Bolinger 1975).

- “Idiom can be defined as a number of words which when taken together, have different meaning from the individual meaning of each word” (Seidi and Mc Mordie 1978).

- Idioms are forms of expression peculiar to a language. Idiomatic expressions conform to no Laws or principles, each Idiomatic expression is a law unto itself. It may violate grammar or logic or both and still be acceptable”. (Mc Graw Hill – Handbook of English, 2004).

In short, idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be worked out from the meanings of its constituent words. For example, in ‘buy a pig in a poke’, “commit oneself to an irrevocable course of action without knowing the relevant facts”, ‘the tip of the iceberg’
“the small visible part of a large problem”, ‘three sheets of the mind’, “drunk” and ‘to stick to one’s guns’, “refuse to change one’s mind or give up”, the meanings of all these idioms are unpredictable and must be learnt separately. Many such idioms are so familiar that native speakers hardly realize they are using an idiom at all. Exposure to a foreign language quickly reveals the true position.

A linguistically fascinating fact about idioms is that some of them (though not all of them) can undergo the ordinary syntactic processes of the language. For example, ‘to let the cat out of the bag’ can appear in sentences like ‘the cat has been well and truly let out of the bag’, in which the idiom has been broken up and its parts scattered about the sentence, and yet the idiomatic sense is still present.

Consider some Telugu idioms and their Hindi equivalents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Te.</th>
<th>Hi.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>veleVwwi cUpu</td>
<td>uMgalI uTAnA ‘To pin-point’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pacca jeMdA cUpu</td>
<td>harI JaMde xiKAnA ‘To give green signal’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mosali kannIIYlu kArcu</td>
<td>magar macca_ke AmsU ‘Crocodile tears’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buraxa callu</td>
<td>kIcada uCAlanA ‘To throw mud’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agnilo AjyaM poyu</td>
<td>jalawe Aga_meM GI dAlanA ‘To add fuel to fire’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaMtlo xummukoVttu</td>
<td>AZKoM_meM Xula JokanA ‘Throw dust into ones eyes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dappu koVttu</td>
<td>DiMDorA pItanA ‘Blow one’s own trumpet’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2.  CLASSIFICATION BASED ON THE NATURE OF IDioms

The word Idiom is of Greek derivation and means ‘standing apart on its own’. It is, then, a construction which stands apart from the rest of the language on account of this irregularity and examination would show that they are almost all of a popular rather than a literary character, belonging to the spoken rather than the written language (Wood, 1986).
2.2.1. CLASSIFICATION OF IDIOMS IN LITERATURE

In the literature, idioms can be divided into two main types, as follows:

I. Those which involve a breach of logic: These constitute the larger and more numerous class, and the illogicality may arise in several ways. There is, for instance, that type, which with unlicensed sequences consists of an adjective, followed by a preposition apparently chosen quite arbitrarily, since it seems to have no logical connection with the word to which it is attached. Yet usage dictates that we should use this particular preposition and no other, even though that other should seem to us the more obvious and natural one. A little thought will show us why we must say ‘different from’ and not ‘different to’. The conception of difference implies a kind of mental or intellectual separation of things that differ (i.e. they are taken ‘from’ each other) just as the conception of similarity implies as intellectual ‘bringing together’. So we say ‘different from’ and ‘similar to’.

Then there are also certain stock phrases (often cast in the form of similes) where all logic seems to be absent. We describe a person as being ‘as fit as a fiddle’ or ‘as bold as brass’. Quite clearly in instances like these the guiding principle has been alliteration; whether the comparison is an apt one or not, or, indeed, whether there is really much point in it at all, does not matter.

II. Those in which a breach of grammar or syntax is involved: Grammar and usage do not always agree. According to all grammatical rules, it is true, a subject complement is in the nominative case, so that we should say, ‘It is I’, ‘It was he’, etc.; but in this particular too strict adherence to the dictates of grammar, especially in conversational or spoken English, is apt to savour of pedantry. The idiomatic ‘It is me’ has by this time become firmly established. Perhaps it is felt that ‘ I’ is too weak and insignificant a word to end a sentence, and even more so to stand alone. Thus in answer to the question ‘Who is there?’ we should never think of replying ‘I’; invariably the answer would be me,
though on grammatical grounds the former alone can be justified, since the reply is short for ‘I am’.

Again, usage and idiom do not always agree with grammar. Consider for example the grammatical (or rather ungrammatical) idiom where we take the case of singular collective nouns with plural verbs. Should one say, ‘The committee is…’ or ‘The committee are…’? Grammar says the former; usage has made the latter equally acceptable. It may, of course, be replied that which form we use depends upon the way in which we regard the committee.

A case of the same kind, but where rigid adherence to grammatical rules is even more patently impossible, is to be found in the construction of the type: ‘A number of people were killed’. Again, it is good idiomatic English; but it is not grammatical. Since the real subject of the sentence is a number (singular) the auxiliary verb should be was. But such precision would be both offensive to our sense of euphony and contrary to the meaning of the sentence, which is certainly plural and not singular.

A point of particular interest, where idiomatic practice effects a subtle but important distinction in meaning, centres on the use or non-use of the definite article in certain constructions involving the verb ‘to go’. We go to church (no definite article) but to the cathedral; to college (no definite article) but to the University. In all the cases cited, there is also a corresponding form with the definite article; but the omission or inclusion of this article makes a difference to the meaning of the phrase in question. When then, do we omit it and when do we include it? The answer to this is we omit the article when we are thinking primarily not of the object or the thing named, but of some activity or function normally connected with it, so that the phrase carries a certain verbal sense. If the article is inserted, on the other hand, there is no such transference of meaning. When we say we are going to church or to chapel we mean that we are going to take part in the worship. But to go to the church is merely to go to the building.

2.2.2. CLASSIFICATION OF IDIOMS UNDER VARIOUS DOMAINS
An another instance to cite, Vijayalakshmi (1998) made an attempt to classify idioms, based on their source or domain of use as in the following:

i. **Social relations**: Those which are experienced by a man in relation with his family, relations, experiences, feelings, etc. illAli poru, kadupu wIpi, xawwapuwra SokaM, xaSamagrahaM.

ii. **Geographical**: Those, which are related with nature. EVMdamAvi, AmuxaM ceVttu, medipaMdu, kAkigola, mannuwinna pAmu.

iii. **Literature**: Those that are based on the epics, literary texts, historical characters and events, culture etc. This again can be classified under various headings as in the following:

   a. Based on Ramayana: udawA Bakwi, kuMBakarNa nixra, rAma rAjyaM, vAnara sEnyaM.

   b. Based on Bharatam: agjAwavAsaM, aBimanyudu, wriSaMku svargaM, Sakuni.

   c. Based on Bhagavatam: krishnaleelalu, vAmanudu.

   d. Based on Poetry: nigamaSarma, varUXini.

   e. Based on Modern Literature: ARAdaBUwi, ruxrAkRa pilli.

   f. Based on Folk Literature: isuka wakkedi-peda wakkedi, komati sAkRaM, xoMxU xoMxe, kIlubomma, gaMgireVxxu.
iv. **Cultural:** The idioms that are based on the customs, traditions, and beliefs, of Telugu speaking people. aMxeVvesina ceVyyi, grahacAraM, piluvani peraMtaM, maMgalYlaM pAdu, etc.

v. **Proverbial:** Some widely used proverbs are cut-short and only a portion of it is used as idioms. These are generally called as Proverbial Idioms. From the proverb “A stich in time saves time”, ‘A stich in time’ and from “The early bird catches the worm”, the idom ‘An early bird’ are derived. Similarly, in Telugu, some proverbial idioms that are derived are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proverbial idioms</th>
<th>Proverbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amuxapu ceVttu</td>
<td>ceVttuleniciota Amuxapu ceVtte mahAvqkRaM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aMxani xrAkRa</td>
<td>aMxani xrAkRapullana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gummadikAyala xoMga</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BujAlu wadumukoVnu</td>
<td>GummadikAyala xoMga aMte BujAlu wadumukunnattlu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guruviMxagiMja</td>
<td>guruvinxa giMja wana nalupu eVrugaxata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laMka mewa</td>
<td>laMka mewaku eti Iwaku saripoyiMxata</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such idioms would retain the sense of the parent proverb.

vi. **Borrowed Idioms:** various languages have constantly inspired Telugu literature at different times. Sanskrit inspired Telugu in its old literary period; in the middle period, Persian-Arabic and in the Modern period, English has been the source of inspiration. With them, many of their idioms crept into Telugu. Some were adopted and yet others were translated.


*Hindustani:* AyArAM gayArAM, nAmke vAswe, ‘name-sake’.


Telugu Idioms adopted from other languages: grIn signal iccu, tUb lEt velugu, gorI kattu, bAjA vAyMcu.

vii. Analagical Creations: Some idioms are created analogically on the lines of the prevalent ones. Consider some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Analogical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kAkamma kaWalu</td>
<td>cilakamma kaWalu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cApakiMxaku nIlYlu</td>
<td>kurcI kiMxaku nIlYlu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

viii. Parody Idioms: Such idioms are found mainly in the field of journalism. These idioms are inspired from the original idioms, which are then modified according to the context. This is done to capture the attention of the readers and thereby convey the messages effectively. Consider some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Modified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mUdu pUvulu Aru kAyalu</td>
<td>mUdu xammulu Aru peggulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ciliki ciliki gAlivAna</td>
<td>ciliki ciliki rAjaklyaM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>niwya kalyANaM –pacca</td>
<td>niwya kalyANaM-notla woraNaM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2.3. OTHER CLASSIFICATIONS
Like English proverbs, English idiomatic phrases are concerned mainly with ordinary life, not with abstract thought or with things intellectual. They say what they have to say in concrete imagery, and they reflect a mentality, which sets great store by worldly success and worldly wisdom; few of them have any relation to things moral or spiritual. Most are of great antiquity and enshrine not only words, which have now become obsolete, but also an attitude of life and conduct that is pre-eminently a practical one, born of the common folk.

Logan Pearsall Smith (1925) classifies them under six heads, as follows:

i. *Those which depend upon a conjunction of similar ideas*, e.g. fear and trembling, beck and call, hammer and tongs, dust and ashes, meat and drink, might and main, etc.

ii. *Those which depend upon opposed ideas, often presented as alternatives*, e.g. more or less, hit or miss, sooner or later, great and small, high and low, far and near, up hill and down dale, head or tails, willy-nilly, first and last, the long and the short.

iii. *Those which depend upon alliteration*, Kith and kin, rack and ruin, chop and change, rhyme and reason, dilly-dally, shilly-shally, few and far, might and main, neck or nothing.

iv. *Those which constitute a comparison based on alliteration*, Fit as a fiddle, bold as brass, dead as a doornail, as large as life, flat as a flounder, as green as grass, as red as a rose, as cold as charity.

v. *Those, which depend on, rhyme*, Fair and square, high and dry, wear and tear, by hook or by crook.
vi. Those, which are examples of repetition, By and by, more and more, through and through.

To these may be added the following:

a. Those, which are comparisons showing popular beliefs or prejudices. As rich as a Jew, as poor as a church mouse, to swear like a trooper, to drink like a fish, as drunk as a lord, as ugly as a witch.

b. Those, which reflect common experiences or observations, or arise from daily life and occupations. As fat as a pig, as thin as a rake (or a rail), as hungry as a hunter, as merry as a lark.

2.3. CONCLUSION

This is a summary of the existing literature on the nature and classification of some idioms. In order to understand the complexity in the structure and organization of idioms it would not be sufficient to propose certain criteria and categorize them. We need a much more deeper understanding of their sub-categorizational properties, argument structure, ordering constraints of constituents and predictability of idiomatic sense in the larger structure. A perfect transfer of idioms, in other words, an acceptable translation of idioms is possible when an analysis involving some or most of these are achieved particularly with reference to the source language idioms and thereby providing translational equivalents in the target language. In the following chapters a similar attempt is made towards that target.