Evaluative Idioms in English and Arabic

1. Introduction

Languages around the world differ from one another in ways that are both minimal and major, depending on the languages compared. The structure and content of a language is often based, at least in part, on the unique ideologies and cultures of various countries. These factors also play a role in how meaning is expressed. Consequently, the idiomatic expressions and collocations of individual languages do not typically share common ground.

Much research has already taken place related to the use of idioms in languages across the globe. One example is the article written by Margarita Strakšiene (2009) which addressed the issue of idiomatic expressions as well as how challenging it is to translate such expressions from one language to another. Strakšiene concluded that translating idioms is comprised of four principal approaches: "paraphrasing, which involves explanatory and stylistic paraphrase; idiom to idiom translation, which involves using idiom of similar meaning and form, and using idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form; literal translation; and finally omission" (Strakšiene, 2009, p. 18). Using one or more of these strategies, translators attempt to convey the meaning of idioms from one language to another.

Admittedly, it is often very difficult (if not impossible) to transfer the precise meaning of an idiom that is commonplace in one language to another. This difficulty is often based on how the idiom was formed, which may relate to religious or cultural beliefs unique to a country or language, or a set of beliefs that is not shared across language groups. At their most basic level, idioms are viewed as figures of speech which Collins English Dictionary defined as "an expression such as a simile, in which words do not have their literal meaning, but are categorized as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units" (cited in Shojaei, 2012, p. 1221). Another reference work—Longman Idioms Dictionary—defined idioms as "a sequence of words which

has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understand each word separately" (cited in Shojaei, 2012, p. 1221). Based on this clarification, an idiom cannot be understood from its individual elements but, as a form of fixed expression, must be taken as a whole.

Idioms are used for various purposes in their given language. Newmark (1988) labelled idioms as "extended" (p. 104) metaphors and cited their two primary functions as either pragmatic or referential. The pragmatic function, according to Newmark, is designed to stimulate an individual's senses or to attract interest, either aesthetically or cognitively. On the other hand, the referential purpose is "to describe a mental process or state, a concept, a person, an object, a quality or an action more comprehensively and concisely than is possible in literal or physical language" (Cited in Strakšiene, 2009, p. 14). In either case, an idiom is designed to convey a message in a simple manner that is readily understood by native speakers of the language.

Idioms are, by nature, only understood in the proper context. According to McMordiew "we can say that an idiom is a number of words which [when they are] taken together, mean something different from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone" (McMordiew, 1983, p. 4). On the other hand Moon (1998) in her book, *A Corpus-Based Approach*, defines idiom as;

> an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways. In lay or general use, idiom has two main meanings. First, idiom is a particular means of expressing something in language, music, art, and so on, which characterizes a person or group; secondly, an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language. (Moon, 1998, p. 3)

Most scholars agree that idioms and fixed expressions display little flexibility and are unique to a particular language.

In this context, Baker (2011) indicated that;

idioms and fixed expressions are at the extreme end of the scale from collocations in one

or both of these areas: flexibility of patterning and transparency of meaning. They are

frozen patterns of languages which allow little or no variation in form and, in the case of

idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components.

(p. 67)

Baker highlighted the inflexibility of idioms by noting that they typically allow "no variation in

form under normal circumstances" (2011, p. 67) which means a translator cannot "a) Change the

order of the words in it; b) Delete a word from it; c) Add a word to it; d) Replace a word with

another; and finally e) Change its grammatical structure" (p. 67). Expanding on the idea that

idioms share a commonality with fixed expressions, Carter (1998) acknowledged that they are

very similar to proverbs, allusions, idiomatic similes and discoursal expressions (p. 66). Shojaei

(2012) recognized that such a description is not sufficient since there are no clear boundaries to

prevent idioms from being confused with other forms of expression.

Others clarify that idioms;

…are not new creations of the speakers themselves. Instead, they are Fixed Expressions

(FEs) that belongs to the conventional repertoire of the native speaker of a language.

Both   meaning and form of these utterances are standardized, often allowing for only minimal

variation. (Sprenger, Levelt, & Kempen, 2006, p. 161)

In other words, idioms may be viewed as a special classification of fixed expressions that are

understood by native speakers and require no individual development of phraseology or

meaning, since these are already established and in place for nearly every native speaker.

Since both the form and the meaning of these expressions are already in place and standardized, there is often very little variation permissible to maintain the thought intended. This is one of the primary reasons why it is so difficult to translate idioms from one language to another and why second language learners struggle with mastering the use of idioms (Tabossi, Wolf, & Koterle, 2009). Idioms, unlike many other fixed expressions, have meanings that are almost always non-compositional. In most cases, there is little or no relationship between the words comprising the idiom (considered on their own) and the idiom's meaning.

1.1. Idiomaticity

Idiomaticity is, as Ghazala (2003) clarified, the idioms' "most special component [which constitutes] their metaphorical aspect" (p. 204), or "the heart of the matter of any idiomatic expression" (p. 208), and "the gist of any idiomatic phrase" (p. 209). Idiomaticity, according to Weinreich (1969), is "important for this reason, if for no other, that there is so much of it in every language" (as cited in Fernando, 1996, p. 1). According to Palmer (1974), idiomaticity is "a lexical feature [i.e.], something to be dealt with in the lexicon or dictionary rather than the grammar" (p. 213). Thus, experts appear divided regarding the importance of idiomaticity and whether it plays an active role in everyday speech.

This work disagrees with Palmer's (1974) assessment and instead supports Kavka and Zybert (2004) who noted that "[…] idiomatic expressions are based on semantic rather than lexical grounds" (p. 55). They also indicated that "[t]eachers, as practitioners, may feel fairly satisfied, though: what they generally imagine is a list of 'useful phrases' for their pupils to learn by heart. They may not realize the fact that idiomatic expressions are based on semantic rather than lexical grounds…" (pp. 54-55). The very fact that idioms must be understood as a living part of grammar rather than merely a lexical exercise is what makes them so difficult to master

when learning a second language and this is especially true with English. For scholars of the English language, idiomaticity explains the substance of idiomatic expressions which are impossible to understand by attempting to discern the meaning of each individual word in the expression. Since idioms are culture–specific as well as language-specific, the semantics involved in their understanding is complex.

A second language learner cannot be considered fluent in the new language without idiomaticity. This infers an ability to use language based on intuition rather than merely relying on memorized rules of grammar (Xiao-hua, 2014). Idiomaticity which, in this context, refers to the ability to properly use native-language expressions, includes knowing when the use of idioms is required and, more importantly, understanding how to form the idiom properly (Warren, 2005). Idiomaticity thus refers to an ability to construct the appropriate clauses (based on the appropriate functions) and phrases so that the generalized meaning of an idiom remains intact in spite of the fact that the context may not seem to carry the meaning desired. This requires selecting the proper potential combinations of words.

Admittedly, this process of construction is considerably more complex than learning basic patterns and formulas of speech in a new language and is why learning how to use idioms in a new language is difficult. Memory alone is not enough for a language learner to become proficient in the idiomaticity of a new language. Rather, idiomaticity must become natural or nearly automatic before a language learner can feel comfortable with the new language (Xiao-hua, 2014). Without a doubt, acquiring idiomaticity requires frequently speaking in the new language and, preferably, interacting with native speakers. By repeating combinations of words and grouping them semantically, a language learner is able to acquire idiomaticity more readily

(Xiao-hua, 2014). Idiomaticity in a second language is a process that only occurs over time, following much practice and trial and error.

Idiomaticity also implies the ability for a second language learner to express themselves both accurately and fluently simultaneously. This is an important distinction since a non-native speaker may be able to communicate without making grammatical mistakes, but that is not the same thing as communicating fluently. Indeed, fluency may occur in the absence of accuracy. To be clear, advanced proficiency necessitates the combination of fluency and grammatical accuracy which allows for the inclusion of idioms in language (Wulff, 2009). As Howarth (1998) noted, "[M]any learners fail to understand the existence of the central area of the phraseological spectrum between free combinations and idioms. It is in handling restricted collocations that errors of both a lexical and grammatical structure constantly occur" (p. 186). Clearly, idiomaticity is one indicator of an individual's advanced level of proficiency in language learning.

1.2. A typology of idioms

Many studies exist that provide insight into the use of idioms. One of the most widely respected studies is an extremely comprehensive corpus-based study of idiomaticity (especially focused on fixed expressions and idioms) carried out by Moon (1998). She included nearly 7,000 idioms and other fixed expressions taken from the Oxford Hector Pilot Corpus (OHPC) as the basis for her data sample (see Moon, 1998, p. 19 for a typology of fixed expressions and idioms). Moon's work is notable because it included a broad array of lexical and grammatical forms such as those usually found in such research, as well as more complex phrases that are not typically included in such studies (e.g., exclamations and subordinate clauses). She discusses certain expressions as part of what she referred to as idiom schemas—such as the cluster of items:

"shake in one's boots, quake in one's shoes, quake in one's boots, quiver in one's boots, quake in one's Doc Marten's, etc." (Moon, 1998, p. 161). Moon's work is impressive for listing the frequency of usage (as percentages) based on specific parameters of use.

Moon (1998) uses the term 'transformations' as one classification of idiom, and reported that 15 percent of the predicate expressions passivize, and that occasional or even rare attestations of embedding, nominalizations or transformations to adjectives can be observed (Moon, chapter 5). Another benefit derived from Moon's research was the revelation that idioms as well as other fixed expressions are more variable then suggested in other studies or by other experts in the field. Specifically, she identified a correlation between the corpus frequency of an item and its variability (Moon, 1998).

In many cases, idioms are referred to as "non-compositional expressions," but, as clarified by Mulhall, this is not completely accurate since it mistakenly attributes to them a universal semantic representation (Mulhall, 2010, p. 1357). At some point in history, it is believed that every idiom began as a literal expression, but over time some became much more idiomatic (acquiring a figurative meaning) while others remained closer to its literal meaning (Mulhall, 2010). According to this line of reasoning, idioms became stratified into what may be classified as "pure idioms (non-compositional, semantically opaque), figurative idioms (noncompositional, logically interpretable) and semi-idioms (partially compositional)" (Mulhall, 2010, p. 1357). This stratification of idioms is not acknowledged in the meaning conveyed in the lexicon, which recognizes 'idiom' only as a single entity. Nevertheless, as noted by Mulhall (2010), it is a more precise and accurate assessment of the variety characteristic of idioms and clearly acknowledges their "inherent semantic features and identifies them as a semantically heterogeneous subgroup" (p. 1357).

As just mentioned, idioms may be classified in one of three ways: pure, figurative, and semi-idioms. Regarding pure idioms, these are understood to refer to hardened or non-compositional terms that are resistant to any lexical, semantic or morphological changes, since these would change its overall meaning (Mulhall, 2010). Mulhall described the phrase "kick the bucket" as a pure idiom since it is "a semantically opaque and lexically fixed expression" (p. 1358). This is consequently the stereotypical form of idiom and what most people think of when discussing idioms.

The second type of idiom—figurative—is also comprised of non-compositional meaning but, in addition, allows an individual to draw a clear comparison between a figurative and literal meaning (Mulhall, 2010). The example provided by Mulhall is the phrase "carry coals to Newcastle" (p. 1358), which may not make sense at all unless a literal explanation is provided. In reality, this idiom implies a sense of futility.

Finally, semi-idioms contain elements that are both figurative and literal, making them more compositional than the other forms of idioms (Mulhall, 2010). Of course, such qualities make semi-idioms highly interpretable, unlike the vast majority of other idioms. Mulhall cited "to cost an arm and a leg" (p. 1358) as an example of a semi-idiom since 'to cost' is readily understandable in any context. Additionally, it was explained that nearly half of all idioms in the English language are composed of these elements and are thus classified as semi-idioms rather than pure idioms (Mulhall, 2010).

1.3. Lexical and grammatical forms of English idioms

In the past, most researchers viewed all idioms as possessing the qualities of pure idioms—that is, fixed and rigid expressions without any flexibility. Beginning primarily in the mid-1980s and onward, however, and led by experts such as Moon (1998), this view is no longer

prominent among linguists. Rather, it is now generally accepted that idioms possess a scale that varies widely in rigidity and flexibility. Nevertheless, there was, for many decades, little genuine exploration of grammar with regards to idioms in general and the broader classes of idioms, with Moon attributing this shortfall to a lack of empirical data available to study. Moon (1998) provided one of the most comprehensive investigations of English idioms to date.

In effect, the very nature of most idioms (i.e., their syntactic and lexical variability) has often limited a clear ability to place them neatly into English grammar. The likely cause of earlier misinterpretation of the classification of idioms was based on a lack of available corpus data from which to draw accurate conclusions. In its place, intuition or guesswork was relied upon, which resulted in confusion regarding idioms. Based on the work of Moon (1998) and others, there is now a growing corpora from which researchers can analyze data related to idioms and gather a much clearer picture of how variations impact the meaning of different idioms, especially in different contexts. While it may be difficult to place idioms properly within grammar, there is little doubt of their integration into it and this realization only deepens as more research is carried out regarding the variations of idioms and fixed expressions.

Research continues to expand the description and classification of English idioms. This has enabled their lexical-grammatical elements (ranging from functional to transformational) conventionally seen as "unique cases from which no rules can be derived" (Sornig, 1988, p. 285) to be gradually classified and categorized in dictionaries. One prominent example is the work completed by Cowie et al. (1983), who developed a unique dictionary of idiomatic expressions that includes structural rules of idioms, the meanings and common usage of a wide variety of idioms and fixed expressions, and more. *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999) includes a special section dedicated to idiomatic language. Consequently, while idioms

and similar fixed expressions used to languish in obscurity in regards to grammatical classification, recent works seek to follow in the path of Lewis (1993) who presented what was a revolutionary presentation that sought to clearly expound upon idiomatic language that had previously been relegated to a type of novelty, rather than fitting comfortably within linguistic studies.

Idioms may be fixed at times but, as the result of variances in syntactic structures, at other times there is much less rigidity (Pinnavaia, 2002). Interestingly, while linguistic experts struggled to reach this conclusion, it was readily understood by native English speakers for many years in spite of the fact that English language learners are typically told that idioms are always inflexible. In reality, this is simply a common practice designed for the sake of simplicity. Once idioms were accepted into the grammatical "community" as it were, it became more acceptable to acknowledge the way in which many idioms can be adapted for various purposes based on differing contexts. This is especially true in cases where idioms can admit passivization (e. g. 'Jane pulled strings for Sue', which can also become 'Sue had her strings pulled by Jane' and maintain a similar meaning) (Newmeyer, 1974, p. 328-336).

1.4. Lexical and grammatical forms of Arabic idioms

Arabic idioms are different from English idioms just as the Arabic language itself differs from English. In Arabic, according to Ibrahim, Abdou and Gheith (2015), most words are "morphologically derived from various root words classified as tri, quad, or pent-literal" (p. 98). Most of these roots are tri-literal, meaning they contain three consonants (Ibrahim et al., 2015). All words in Arabic are classified as nouns, verbs, or particles. Another complication of Arabic is its division into two different forms—Standard (which includes what is known as Classical Arabic and MSA—which describes printed forms of the language) and Dialectal (which covers

all other forms of the language that are spoken within the culture). This latter form may also be referred to as Colloquial Arabic (Ibrahim et al., 2015).

Unlike the way idioms are structured in English, verb-preposition collocations appear to be one of the primary means of structuring idioms in Arabic. In some cases, collocations of this sort render a phrase that is non-idiomatic and the combined meaning is readily apparent. However, similar to English, the collocation becomes idiomatic once the meaning of the new phrase exceeds its individual parts (Mir, 1989). Mir explained that Classical Arabic contains many examples of the use of "non-regular" (1989, p. 6) prepositions with verbs. This is not an accident, but the purpose is to produce a tadmīn ("implicative meaning") (Mir, 1989, p. 6). Mir expands on this concept by stating that "The preposition, that is to say, calls for the positing of some word with which it is normally used. The use of non-regular prepositions thus represents one aspect of the ījāz ("brevity, terseness of expression") that is characteristic of Classical Arabic and of the Qur'an" (Mir, 1989, p. 7). Interestingly, it appears that there are many examples of idiomatic expressions found in the Qur'an.

While the work done by Moon (1998) is considered one of the primary examples of research into English idioms, Arabic has its own highly-recommended research. One of the most thorough examples of a corpus-based study examining the lexical and grammatical behavior of Arabic idioms was carried out by Abdou (2012). In his study, he defined an idiom as: "a multiword unit that has a syntactic function within the clause and has a figurative meaning in terms of the whole or a unitary meaning that cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual components" (Abdou, 2012). While Abdou's work was not as extensive as Moon's, since he only collected 654 idioms to study and analyze, it still represents a significant achievement for the study of Arabic. In particular, he focused on 70 idioms obtained from news

sources of Arabicorpus, a corpus of Arabic developed by Dilworth Parkinson (Abdou, 2012). This cross-section of idiomatic expressions yielded a great deal of knowledge of the innerworking of Arabic idioms.

In particular, Abdou (2012) investigated idioms in a grammatical and lexical context, focusing on idiomatic behavior in regards to "(1) lexical variation, (2) perspective-adaptation (which refers to cases where an idiom may have two or more variants that differ in terms of e.g. transitivity and intransitivity, causativity, and reflexivity), (3) changes in the lexicogrammatical complexity of idioms, (4) inflectability, and (5) the use of active and passive voice" (cited in Workshop on Arabic Corpus Linguistics, n.d., p. 8). Similar to findings with English idioms, recent research indicates that Arabic idioms are much more flexible than previously expected or believed (Attia, 2006). Many of the figurative images invoked by idioms in Arabic are readily transparent and the use of isomorphism further tends to provide a high level of clarity for many idiomatic expressions in the language.

Since there is such a high level of figurativity found in many Arabic idioms, this could explain why the evaluative function is also present with such a degree of regularity. Indeed, there is a significant correlation between evaluation and figurative language identified in many research works in recent years. Moon and Abdou are included among this number, and Moon (1998) reported that the bulk of examples she found indicated that "any metaphorical or simile content have some evaluative function" (p. 225). This is not surprising since figurative language conveys evaluations far more regularly than non-expressive language. Moreover, cultural norms, which are a known source of idiomatic expression, may be the foundation of evaluative content in many idioms (Abdou, 2012). This, of course, will vary depending upon how (or if) literal meaning is imparted to the idiomatic meaning.

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