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AND HOW TO USE THEM

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I What are idioms?

general note

We often read and hear the phrase 'language is a living thing', but most of us do not stop to think about *how* and *why* this is true. Living things grow and change, and so does language. One can readily recognise differences between Shakespeare's English and the English of modern authors, but present-day English is also growing and changing, and these tendencies are not so easy to recognise.

Since the general tendencies of present-day English are towards more idiomatic usage, it is important that this book on Idioms should show the learner how the language is developing. Idioms are not a *separate* part of the language which one can choose either to use or to omit, but they form an *essential* part of the general vocabulary of English. A description of how the vocabulary of the language is growing and changing will help to place idioms in perspective.

In this chapter we shall also consider some changing attitudes towards language, several different aspects of idioms, and finally difficulties which learners experience in using idioms.

Growth and change in the English vocabulary

1 One does not need to be a language expert to realise that the vocabulary of a language grows continually with new developments in knowledge. New ideas must have new labels to name them. Without new labels, communication of these new ideas to others would be impossible. Most such words come from the English of special subjects such as science and technology, psychology, sociology, politics and economics.

2 Words which already exist can also take on a particular meaning in a particular situation. For example, *to lock someone out*

usually means 'to lock a door in order to prevent someone from entering'. However, the verb has a special meaning in the context of industrial relations. It means that the employers refuse to let the workers return to their place of work until they stop protesting. The noun *a lock-out* is also used in this special context, and it is, therefore, a new word in the language. Similar words are *to sit in, a sit-in* and *to walk out, a walk-out*, where the verbs take on a new meaning in the context of industrial strike and protest and where the nouns are only used in this context, thus becoming new words.

3 Not only can words which already exist express new ideas and thus help a language to grow; also, new ideas can be expressed by the combination of two or three existing words. Here is an example of this: the words *wage* and *to freeze* are well known, but the idea of *a wage-freeze* came into the language only a few years ago. *To freeze wages* is another expression from British politics and economics and means 'to stop increases in wages'. The same idea is found in *to freeze prices* and *a price-freeze*.

4 A new word can be formed by changing a verbal phrase into a noun (as in *a lock-out*), or by changing a noun into a verb. Both these changes are very popular in American English (AE). British English (BE) quickly borrows new word formations from AE. Here are some nouns formed from verbal phrases: *a stop-over, a check-up, a walk-over, a hand-out, a set-up*, all common especially in informal style. Here are some verbs formed from nouns: *to pilot (a plane), to captain (a team), to radio (a message), to service (a motorcar), to air-freight (a parcel), to Xerox (a document), to pressure (somebody)*. It is easy to give words new grammatical functions because English is flexible. When the function is changed, it is not necessary to change the form. Not only nouns, but also adjectives are made into verbs to show a process, as in *to soundproof, to skidproof, to streamline*. All these changes in the function of words have one purpose, that is, to make the form of words used shorter and more direct. They are short-cuts in language. These short forms are quicker and more convenient and for this reason they are becoming more and more popular.

5 There are other short-cuts which BE has borrowed from AE. Verbs can also be made from the root of a noun, eg *to housekeep* from the noun *housekeeper, to barkeep* from *barkeeper, to babysit* from *babysitter*. *To house-sit* is a new word which has been copied from *to babysit*, because it includes the same idea, namely, 'to look after someone's house while he is away'.

6 Another short-cut joins words together in order to form one adjective instead of a long phrase, eg a *round-the-clock* service, instead of 'a service which is offered around the clock' (ie 24 hours).

7 New words can be made by adding endings such as *-ise* or *-isation* to adjectives or nouns. This is especially popular in the language of newspapers. Here are some examples: *to decimalise* instead of the long phrase 'to change into the decimal system', *to departmentalise* instead of 'to organise into different departments' and *containerisation* instead of 'the process of putting things into containers'.

8 Prefixes such as *mini-*, *maxi-*, *super-*, *uni-*, *non-*, *extra-* are put in front of words (mainly nouns and adjectives) to indicate the quantity or quality of something in the shortest possible way. Here are some examples: *supergrade petrol* (the best quality), *unisex* (in fashion, the same design in clothes for men and women), a *non-stick* frying-pan, *non-skid* tyres, *mini-skirt*, *extra-mild* cigarettes.

9 New words can be made by mixing two words that already exist, i e by combining part of one word with part of another. A well-known example is *smog* (smoke + fog). Others are *brunch* (breakfast + lunch), *newscast* (news + broadcast) and *motel* (motorist + hotel). AE uses more of these words than BE. Here are some from AE: *laundromat* (laundry + automat), *cablegram* (cable + telegram) and *medicare* (medical + care). Here is one from the world of economics: *stagflation* (stagnation + inflation).

Changing attitudes to language

Educated writers and readers of English are becoming more flexible and tolerant about what is considered to be correct or acceptable usage. Some deviations from the grammatical rules of the past are now accepted not only in spoken but also in written English. Such changes of attitude can be observed in several parts of grammar, including case, number, tense and the position of prepositions at the end of a phrase or sentence. A few examples will make this clear. *Who shall I ask?* now appears in written English instead of *Whom shall I ask?* (case). *Neither of them are coming* instead of *Neither of them is coming* (number). *I never heard of her before* instead of *I have never heard of her before* (tense). Prepositions appear now quite regularly at the end of a sentence in written English, where previously this was only common in spoken English and was considered bad style when written. Examples of all the above can easily be found even in newspapers which have a reputation for writing good and correct English.

The attitude of users of the language towards style is also becoming more flexible. Words which were considered to be *slang* in the past may be more acceptable in present-day English; they may

now be considered to be *colloquial* or *informal*. The expression *to be browned off with somebody* was in the past a slang expression for 'to be bored with or irritated by somebody'. Since the slang expression of the same meaning *to be cheesed off with somebody* came into the language, *browned off* has generally risen in status and is now considered by most people to be informal and not slang. There are several other cases where a new expression has replaced an already existing one, giving the existing expression a rise in status from slang to informal. This is also partly due to the spread in the use of *taboo* words (or *swear-words*), which much more freely now replace words (like *damn* and *bloody*) which were in the past considered to be *bad language*. The taboo words are now bad language and the other words do not give so much offence as in the past. Both of these sets of words, however, should be avoided by the learner until his mastery of the language is so complete that he knows exactly when, where and how to use such words.

Different aspects of the idiom

We shall now take a close look at some aspects of idioms. An important fact which must be stressed is that idioms are not only colloquial expressions, as many people believe. They can appear in formal style and in slang. They can appear in poetry or in the language of Shakespeare and the Bible. What, then, is an idiom? We can say that 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. These are the special features of some idioms. 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). English is very rich in idiomatic expressions. In fact, it is difficult to speak or write English without using idioms. An English native speaker is very often not aware that he is using an idiom; perhaps he does not even realise that an idiom which he uses is grammatically incorrect. A non-native learner makes the correct use of idiomatic English one of his main aims, and the fact that some idioms are illogical or grammatically incorrect causes him difficulty. Only careful study and exact learning will help.

It cannot be explained why a particular idiom has developed an unusual arrangement or choice of words. The idiom has been fixed by long usage—as is sometimes seen from the vocabulary.

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'. The word *poke* is an old word meaning *sack*. *Poke* 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 individual word.

There are many different sources of idioms. As will be made clear later, 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 the every-day life of Englishmen, 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.* Agricultural life has given rise to *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 colours, to cross swords with someone, to fight a pitched battle, to fight a losing/winning battle.* Many idioms include parts of the body, animals, and colours (see Chapter 12). The Bible gives us *to kill the fatted calf, to turn the other cheek, the apple of one's eye.*

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*; these are dealt with in Chapter 4. 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.* A native speaker is not consciously aware of this inconsistency. 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 clear. *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, but how can we know this if we have not learnt it as an idiom? 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, and we have no idea what it means, either! 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.*

We find, in fact, that most idioms belong to the second group, where the form is regular, but the meaning is unclear. However, even in this group, some idioms are clearer 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'.

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 dangerous position or that he is hiding. But if we hear the phrase in context, the meaning becomes clear to us: *Ten years ago John joined the company, and now he's the general manager! Yes, he's really at the top of the tree!* 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. We shall take a closer look at the first of these examples. *To get off* usually appears together with *bus* or *bicycle*, as in this sentence: *Mary didn't know her way round town, so Jane took her to the bus stop and then told her where to get off.* But in its idiomatic sense *to tell someone where to get off* means 'to tell someone rudely and openly what you think of him' as in this context: *Jane had had enough of Mary's stupid and critical remarks, so she finally told her where to get off.* For a foreign learner, this idiomatic meaning is not even exactly clear in context.

It was said earlier that we have to learn an idiom as a whole because we often cannot change any part of it. A question which the learner may ask is: 'How do I know which parts of which idioms can be changed?' The idioms which 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 which are not fixed. We can make this clear with an

example. Take the idiom *to give someone the cold shoulder.* Which changes are possible? The idiom means 'to treat someone in a cold or unfriendly way'. We may ask if it is possible to say *to give someone the 'cool'* or *'warm' shoulder* or *to give someone 'a' cold shoulder* or *to give a cold shoulder 'to' someone.* None of these are possible, but how can the foreign learner know this? Alternative possibilities are shown in this book by the mark /. If this mark does not appear in the arrangement of the idiom, the idiom is fixed. The learner should note the alternative possibilities and use only these and no others. *To give someone the cold shoulder* is therefore 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 verb but the pair *forty winks* is fixed. We cannot say *'fifty' winks.* We 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 which 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.*

When and where to use idioms

We have now talked about several aspects of idioms: where they come from, their form, their meaning, if and how we can vary them. We shall now look at the reasons for the difficulties which foreign learners experience when they try to *use* idioms.

One of the main difficulties is that the learner does not know in which situations it is correct to use an idiom. He does not know the level of style, that is, whether an idiom can be used in a formal or in an informal situation. Help is given in this book with the markings *formal* and *informal.* Unmarked idioms can be used in any situation.

Choice of words depends on the person one is speaking to and on the situation or place at the time. If the person is a friend and the situation is private, we may use informal or even slang expressions. In a formal situation, when we do not know the person we are speaking to very well or the occasion is public, we choose words much more carefully. It would be wrong to choose an informal expression in some rather formal situation and bad manners to choose a slang expression. This means that we can express the same information or idea in more than one way using a different level. Here is an example. If one arrives late when meeting a friend, a typical informal way of apologising would be: 'Sorry I'm late!—but I got badly held up.' However, if one came too late to

a meeting with strangers or a business meeting, another choice of expression for the apology would be appropriate, perhaps 'I do apologise for being late. I'm afraid my train was delayed.'

The expressions marked *formal* are found in written more than in spoken English and are used to show a distant relationship between the speakers. Such expressions would be used for example when making a formal speech to a large audience. Expressions marked *informal* are used in every-day spoken English and in personal letters. (*Slang* expressions are used in very informal situations between good friends. Learners should not make frequent use of slang expressions as they usually—but unexpectedly—become out-of-date and sound strange.) It is advisable to concentrate on the expressions which are marked *informal* and on the unmarked expressions which are neutral in style and can be used in any situation.

Another major difficulty is that the learner does not know if an idiom is natural or appropriate in a certain situation. This can only be learnt by careful listening to native speakers or careful reading of English texts which contain idioms. In order to help the learner with this difficulty, examples of usage in typical situations are given where it seems necessary. The learner should take careful note of these examples.

The third major difficulty is that of fixed idioms and only partly fixed idioms, which has already been discussed. It is most important that the learner should be exact in his use of fixed idioms, as an inaccurate idiom may mean very little or even nothing at all to a native speaker. Above all, remember that it is usually extremely unwise to translate idioms into English from one's own native language. One may be lucky that the two languages have the same form and vocabulary, but in most cases, the result will be utterly bewildering to the native speaker—and possibly highly amusing.

As was said earlier, the correct use of idiomatic English should be the aim of every learner. It is an aim which is worthwhile and satisfying. Mastery of idiom comes only slowly, through careful study and observation, through practice and experience, but remember: *practice makes perfect* and *all things are difficult before they are easy.*

Note 1: Stress in idioms

Most English idioms are used in English speech just like any other phrase, clause or sentence, i e the word that is given the main stress (or accent) is the *last* noun (not pronoun), verb (not auxiliary verb), adjective or adverb in the phrase, clause or sentence. For example, in the idioms *on the face of it*, *to take the cake* and *neither here nor there*, the words *face*, *cake* and *there* carry the strong stress.

However, in some idioms the word that carries the strong stress is not the last 'main' word in that idiom. These idioms that have an 'unpredictable' stress pattern are given in this book the special *stress mark* ˈ in front of the syllable of the word that carries the stress. For example, in the idioms *like a bull in a ˈchina shop*, *a wild ˈgoose chase*, and *a ˈbig shot*, the stressed words are not, as one might expect (or 'predict'), *shop*, *chase* and *shot*, but *ˈchina*, *ˈgoose* and *ˈbig*—therefore these 'unpredictably' stressed words carry the stress mark ˈ.

Note 2: The use of the slant mark / and brackets ( ) in idioms

The slant mark / is used to show *alternative* words in idioms. For example, in *to break fresh/new ground*, the slant mark means that the idiom can be used in either of the forms *to break fresh ground* or *to break new ground*.

The brackets ( ) are used to show *optional* words. For example, in *on board (ship)*, the brackets mean that both the forms *on board* and *on board ship* can be used.

Sometimes an idiom is given with both a slant and brackets. For example, *on (an/the) average* means that any of the forms *on average*, *on an average* or *on the average* can be used.

2 Special uses of words with grammatical functions

general note

There are several words in frequent use which have functions other than the ones with which the learner may immediately associate them. Let us illustrate this. If the learner is asked what he knows about the word 'there', he will most probably say what he knows about its grammatical function as an adverb of place. In the same way, a description of 'shall' or 'should' would certainly include reference to the future and conditional tenses. We therefore call such words 'words with grammatical functions'.

However, several such words can be used in other ways, which need special attention drawn to them. It is the purpose of this chapter to point out some additional uses of 'grammatical' words, as a knowledge of such uses will greatly improve the idiomatic quality of the learner's English.

Explanations have been kept as short as possible. They should not be regarded as 'rules' but as descriptions of what the native speaker expresses when he uses the words in a certain situation. All explanations are followed by an example from everyday usage.

will/would; shall/should

We automatically associate *will* and *shall* with the expression of future time in English. *Would* and *should* are likewise associated with the expression of the conditional tense. These associations are correct, but expression of time is only one use of these words. Also, future time makes use of other means of expression, not only *will* and *shall*. If we examine carefully how the native speaker expresses future thought and action, we find that he makes great use of *to be going to*, *to be about to*, the present simple tense and the present continuous tense. Let us consider the following examples:

Peter's going to stay here for two more weeks.
I'm about to make a cup of tea.

We leave for Australia in three weeks' time.
I'm leaving soon because my bus goes in half an hour.

In the above, all the actions or events refer to future time but do not depend on *shall* or *will*. However, when the native speaker does use *shall* and *will* to express future events, eg *I'll see John tomorrow*, he does not follow the traditional grammar-book rule which tells the learner to use *shall* with *I* and *we*, and *will* with the other persons. This may be a matter of considerable confusion to the learner. Similarly, grammar books usually tell us to use *should* for the first person in the conditional tense and *would* for the others. If we wish to be realistic about the actual use of *shall/will* and *should/would* by the educated native speaker, we realise that he usually does not make this distinction in the first person when he speaks. Also, in spoken English, both *shall* and *will* are shortened to *'ll* (eg *I'll, you'll*) unless they are stressed. Additionally, British English (BE) and American English (AE) differ in their use of *shall* and *should* in the first person. The forms *shall* and *should* for the future and the conditional can and do occur in spoken BE, but these forms are rare in spoken AE. *Shall* there appears formal, even unnatural, and *shan't* is almost never heard. *Will* and *won't* replace them respectively. In AE, *shall* is natural only in a question, eg *What shall we do now?* Otherwise, it sounds very emphatic. Similarly, in spoken AE *would* is the usual form in the first person of the conditional tense, shortened to *'d* unless stressed (eg *we'd, she'd*).

To summarise, in spite of what grammar books usually tell us, *will* and *would* are the usual forms for all persons in both spoken BE and AE. *Shall* and *should* do occur in spoken BE, but are very rare in spoken AE. In both BE and AE, the shortened forms *'ll* and *'d* are used informally when not stressed; in the negative, *won't* and *wouldn't* are used.

Let us now look at some special uses of *will/would, shall/should.*

will/would express

1 WILLINGNESS OR READINESS

I'll attend the meeting if I possibly can.
Open the door, please, 'will you?
I 'would attend the meeting but I'm afraid it's impossible.

2 UNWILLINGNESS OR REFUSAL (in negative sentences)

I've asked Bill to lend me his car, but he 'won't.
I asked Peter to tell me the secret, but he 'wouldn't.

3 A PROMISE

I'll lend you the money—that's a promise.
I promise I won't disturb you again.

4 PROBABILITY OR SUPPOSITION

That's the door-bell. It'll be Fred, I bet.
That'll be the lady Mary was talking about; she said she had a French accent.
Tom would have been about fifty when he moved to London.

5 A HABIT OR FREQUENT OCCURRENCE

She will often play the piano for three hours without a break.
At the weekends we would go to a play or a concert.

6 SOMETHING TYPICAL OR INEVITABLE (*will* and *would* always stressed)

I keep telling Jim not to talk in class, but he simply 'will do it.
Boys 'will be boys!
The bus 'would come late, just when I'm in a hurry!

7 A REQUEST

Will you give me a ring tomorrow at about three?
Would you let me know at what time you'll be arriving?

would expresses A PREFERENCE TO DO SOMETHING in

*I **would rather** go by train than by bus.*
*I **would sooner** walk than stand in the cold waiting for the bus.*

shall expresses

1 A REQUEST FOR THE WILL OF THE LISTENER (in the first and third persons)

Shall I lend you the book? (ie Do you want me to lend . . .?)
Shall Peter accompany you, or isn't that necessary? (ie Do you want Peter to accompany you?)

2 THE SPEAKER'S WILL (an order or command in the second and third persons; *shall* is always stressed)

He says he won't apologize but I say he 'shall!
I know you don't want to go, but I say you 'shall!

3 THE SPEAKER'S PROMISE OR THREAT (in the second and third persons; *shall* is not stressed)

If you're a good girl you shall have an ice-cream.
If Tom is caught stealing again he shall be punished.