

## Transformation of Idioms and Transparency

*Anahit Hovhannisyan, Ani Mkrtchyan*

*(English Department, Gyumri State Pedagogical Institute, Gyumri, Armenia)*

**Abstract:** Idioms have no social boundaries or limitations as they exist in all cultures and classes of the society as well as in all human languages. Idioms are part of the language and cannot be described apart from the given language.

The article deals with the essential features of idioms, their grammatical and lexical changes within defining context. In an appropriate discourse situation idioms undergo considerable changes not only in their meaning but also their structure. Transformation of idiomatic expressions directly relates to their “transparency”; “more transparent” idioms easily undergo semantic and structural changes, whereas “less transparent” idioms are more stable.

**Key words:** transformation, defining context, transparency, movability, semantic and structural patterning of idioms

### 1. Introduction

Why do some idioms allow certain lexical variations and others — not? Why do some idioms allow certain grammatical changes in particular linguistic environment and others — not?

Many aspects of metaphor use need to be clarified. Our approach to the study of idioms combines contextual analysis as idioms undergo both lexical and grammatical changes in a particular context. Empirical analysis of idioms usage in a definite context is of paramount importance, as in this case idioms are looked upon not as static but dynamic units; they are considered to be stable units with respect to the linguistic system and they would be considered to be unstable with respect to the language use.

What really is an idiom? One definition is that an idiom is a stable combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning (Koonin A., 1970, p. 210). The eminent Russian linguist O. S. Akhmanova insists on the semantic integrity of such phrases prevailing over the structural separateness of their elements (Akhmanova O. S., 1972, p. 43).

These definitions stress two distinctive and inherent features of idioms: their stability (lexical and grammatical) and integrity (or transference of meaning) which differentiates them from free word-groups and from stable word-combinations of non-phrase logical character.

On the other hand Palmer claims that semantic content of the idiom includes not only its figurative but also the literal meaning of the constituent parts (Palmer F. R., 1976, p. 81).

A lot of phrases can have both figurative and literal meanings, such as every *rose has its thorn* (on one hand

it refers to roses having thorns. And on the other hand when it metaphorically applies to non-rose situations meaning “*something beautiful or good*”, the phrase has its own downsides), etc. (Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, 1979).

In the same way idioms may be awakened and played upon by a creative speaker or writer at his will. Therefore the term “*sleeping metaphor* is a better term for idioms with more or less transparent meaning” (Müller C. 2008, p. 189).

In what follows, an idiomatic phrase can be recognized through the ever existing conflict between *the literal meaning* of its components and the contradicting *contextual elements*. In this regard we consider a context as the most prolific type with the modified occurrences of idioms. Context is relevant for writers who find plenty of possibilities to transform idioms both lexically and grammatically. The author manipulates with the components of the idiom making them serve his or her purpose. The events and concepts which are being talked about in a particular context also affect the appropriate choice of idiom (Hovhannisyanyan A., 2011, p. 350). We define such type of context as “*determining*”.

Recent linguistic research in the field of idiomaticity has shown that both the synthetic and the morphological pattern of an idiom may undergo a considerable change on contextual appropriateness; idioms displaced from one surrounding to another assume new distributive capacities and undergo interesting lexical and grammatical (morphological and syntactic) changes.

Methods of realizing meanings of constituent elements of idiomatic expressions are rather specific for every creative writer.

The data at our disposal show how a set of devices (substitution, insertion, inversion, ellipsis) affect the use of idioms in certain contexts.

In passing from general usage into some special sphere of communications an idiom, as a rule, undergoes some sort of lexical changes. Substitution is one of lexical variables, when one of the lexical items is replaced by another one and the substitution of the variable member doesn't destroy the set expression as such. By variable element we mean the element of the idiomatic expression which is structurally necessary, but free to vary lexically (Arnold, 1973, p. 148).

Thus, the “***not care a rap***” (*not care at all*) has some options for changing the lexical item *rap*:

She gave a deep sigh. “You **don't care two hoots** for me. That's what that means”. That's not fair. (W. S. Maugham, p. 54)

Your only quarrel with me really is that I **don't care a two penny damn** what you think about me. (W. S. Maugham, p. 62)

I do not believe the people who tell me they **do not care a row of pins** for the opinion of their fellows. It is the bravado of ignorance. (W. S. Maugham, p. 7)

The range of lexical options in this idiom is wide; though the words “*rap*”, “*damn*” and “*pin*” do not belong to the same synonymic paradigm, in the given contexts they operate as *contextual synonyms*. Sometimes the variation is limited as in the case of “***to cut a poor figure***” (*to create a good image*), “***to give the greatest astonishment***” (*to cause a feeling of very great surprise*). If we substitute the word “*poor*” with “*fine*”, “*handsome*”, etc., the meaning of the idiom will be changed as well. For instance:

He was tall and slim and **cut a handsome figure**. (Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, 1979)

Wearing a dirty T-shirt and torn shorts, Tom **cut a poor figure** at the wedding. (Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, 1979)

In the first sentence the idiom “*to cut a handsome figure*” means “*to have a good look*”, whereas the idiom “*to cut a poor figure*” in the second sentence means “*to appear or behave badly*”.

By the way, the number of cases when synonymous substitution doesn’t yield to the change of the meaning of the whole phrase is very limited.

For instance the idiom *to escape/slip somebody’s memory* (to be forgotten):

The exact words of their conversation have, I am sorry to say, **escaped my memory**. (W. S. Maugham, p. 72)

**Has it slipped your memory** that I’m meeting him tonight? (W. S. Maugham, p. 63)

In case of *insertion* the sequence of component parts may be broken and some additional elements or words may be inserted without destroying the idiomatic meaning of the phrase and establishing syntactic ties with its constant elements. For instance: “*Were they on **very** friendly terms?*” “Not specially, I should say. Not that I knew anyway.” (W. S. Maugham, p. 9)

The above-presented example shows the case of insertion within the idiom. The original idiom is “*to be on friendly terms*” (*to keep good relationship*) and the insertion of the word “*very*” enhances the meaning of the idiom, which can be paraphrased as “*to keep especially good relationship*”.

The *ellipsis* that occurs in particular context is used for stylistic purposes in the literary text. Let’s consider the following examples:

In England and France he was the square peg in the round hole, **but here the holes were any sort of shape, and no sort of peg was quite amiss**. (W. S. Maugham, p. 11)

“Sooner or later he’ll be quite ready to come back to London, and no great harm will have been done.” “I wouldn’t do that,” said Mrs. Mac Andrew. “I’d give him **all the rope** he wants. He’ll come back with his tail between his legs and settle down again quite comfortably. (W. S. Maugham, p. 18)

I mean with us – our tempers and our nerves. **All on edge**. (A. Christie, p. 15)

The first example presents only separate elements (in the second part of the sentence) of the idiom “*a square peg in a round hole*” (*a person unsuitable for the position he fills*). The second example is more interesting, for it has only one word from the original idiom. The word “*rope*” represents the idiom “*to give somebody enough rope to hang himself*” (*allow somebody enough freedom of action in the expectation that one will overreach oneself*).

The third example presents a part of idiom “*to set the nerves on edge*” (*to make feel nervous*) in conversation. The phrase “*all on edge*” refers to the word “*nerves*” which was presented in the previous sentence. “*All on edge*.” is an elliptical sentence which represents the part of the mentioned idiom.

In the next example ellipsis gives a new semantically independent status to a former component of an idiom (*skeleton*) in the idiom “*a/the skeleton in the cupboard*”.

“Oh! I don’t think I’m denying the importance of the biographical element in literary appreciation. I know very well how much a full knowledge of a writer’s life adds to the interpretation of the work. I am not inclined to expose **skeletons** which have been so carefully buried”. (W. S. Maugham, p. 177)

The new figurative meaning of “*skeleton*” which coincides with the global meaning of the whole phrase is now registered by most contemporary dictionaries and manifested in many uses of the word.

Idioms undergo not only lexical but also grammatical changes in a particular context. Changeability of the grammatical tense form is the most frequently occurring type of idioms’ transformation. The grammatical category of idioms’ transformations may also comprise the following elements: changeability of number, article, the cases of passivization, splitting and verbal idioms’ reversal into nominal.

The grammatical transformations occur very often in the usage of idioms in literature. Changeability of the grammatical tense form is the most frequently occurring type of idioms' transformation.

Tense form in verb idioms usually reflects the time frame of the discourse. Let us consider the following examples:

It is true. I **have the head of a sieve**. However, the other young lady was most kind and showed me everything in the kindest way. (A. Christie, p. 51)

But like all specialists, Bauerstein's **got a bee in his bonnet**. Poisons are his hobby, so, of course, he sees them everywhere. (A. Christie, p. 71)

My heart thumped against my ribs, and, I don't know why, I **flew into a temper**. (W. S. Maugham, p. 81)

In the first example, the verb in the idiom "**to have a head of a sieve**" (*to forget things easily*) is presented in the present simple form. The same is in the second example, where the infinitive form "**to have a bee in one's bonnet**" (*to have a fixed idea about something*) is changed into the present simple form. Present simple forms of verbs are used to create the scene of the discourse in the present time.

The third presented example shows the tense shift from the infinitive form into past simple tense form within the idiom "**to fly into a temper**" (*to start behaving irrationally*) to refer to a past event. It is used to disclose the past time discourse.

The change of tense includes not only the purely grammatical forms of tenses, but also the grammatical moods and conditional sentences that are related to the tense category. The following examples present the conditional mood of the verb in verbal idiom:

I have no patience with you. Do you think if you were ill he **would stir a finger** to help you? (W. S. Maugham, p. 72)

I'd **take your word**, (but there are others over me who'll be asking what the devil I mean by it? (A. Christie, p. 13)

The verb "**to stir one's finger**" (*to bother, to put efforts*) in the first example is used in the conditional sentence to define the time frame of the discourse in which the idiom appears.

In the second example the infinitival form of the idiom "**to take one's word**" (*to believe smb*) expresses the subjunctive mood, which means that the presented situation does not actually exist.

The variations of idioms, as it was mentioned above, depend on the time frame of the discourse, thus the verbs of idioms, which appear in certain texts, behave according to the rules of the grammatical tense.

The usage of the particular pronoun in the idiom is a widespread phenomenon and practically every idiom containing *one/one's* in its original form, is presented with a particular noun or pronoun in a sentence. The pronoun change can be explained grammatically, for the pronoun in the function of subject is the part of the sentence from which the action originates.

For instance, the idiom "**to cast one's mind back**" (*to remember the past*) can acquire different personal pronouns instead of *one's* when used in sentences:

Casting **my** mind back I could recall the days spent in her; not happier, though. (W. S. Maugham, p. 41)

They have been casting **their** minds back for quite a time trying to find any evidence to shake each other's fear of being guilty. (A. Christie, p. 45)

In the above presented examples the pronoun "*my*" is used to determine the subject of the sentence. As the subject in the first sentence is the personal pronoun "*I*" the pronoun "*one's*" behaves consequently. And in the

second sentence the subject is expressed by the personal pronoun “*they*”, therefore the pronoun in the idiom is “*their*”. These two examples present the change of person within the same idiom.

The passivization is not a frequent phenomenon in English still some idioms are allowed to undergo this kind of transformation. The passivization is directly related to the transparency of idioms. For example, the phrases *give up the ghost* and *kick the bucket* involve transitive verbs (give up, kick), still none of them can be transformed into the passive form *the bucket was kicked* (Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, p. 1979).

Transparent idioms can undergo the process of passivization and those that are not transparent — not.

For instance:

*She, who had always considered herself “not the falling-in-love kind”, was swept clean off her feet.* (A. Christie, p. 60)

*Anyway, he had a bad day; and was brought down to earth.* (W. S. Maugham, p. 55)

In the first example the idiom “*to sweep of one’s feet*” (to make smb feel insecure/confused) is transparent in meaning, therefore it can be easily paraphrased into the passive form “*smb was made to feel insecure/confused*”.

The idiom “to bring somebody down to earth” used in the second sentence can be paraphrased as “to make somebody return to a normal way of thinking after a period of excitement” and the paraphrasing in its turn can be passivized — “somebody was made to return to a normal way of thinking after a period of excitement”. The transparent idioms can undergo the process of passivization and at the same time retain their idiomaticity.

As it is dictated by the grammatical rules of the English language morphological change (divisibility) is evident when one of the elements (but not the last) is subjected to number change (singular changes into plural and vice versa).

Let us consider an example of the number change in the idiom “**a square peg in a round hole**” (a person unsuitable for the position he/she fills):

*In England and France he was **the square peg in the round hole**, but here the holes were any sort of shape, and no sort of peg was quite amiss.* (W. S. Maugham, p. 11)

*There are not so **many round pegs in square holes** as one might think.* (W. S. Maugham, p. 15)

The presented example is a case of pluralization, i.e., a process during which the idiom of originally singular form is presented in the plural.

In English there are some idioms that can be used only in a singular form, and if pluralized, they lose their idiomatic status, for the reason that they do not exist in plural. An example of such idioms can be “**to find fault with somebody**” which means *to find things wrong with someone or something* (Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, p. 1979). The idiom exists only in singular and the pluralized version like “*to find faults with somebody*” is not accepted.

Thus the pluralization of the verbs in idioms (if the idioms are transparent) is quite an ordinary and natural process, but the opposite of it can cause many problems. The idioms that exist in plural forms are usually not transformed into singular. Let us consider an example:

*If anything unpleasant happens, if you are asked what you know and who put you to what you’re doing – don’t try to be heroic. **Spill the beans at once.*** (Agatha Christie, p. 72)

*There’s a difference, perhaps, to working in one’s own house and in a public place. But he must understand, I can’t sit still and **twiddle my thumbs** when it’s necessary to do something!* (W. S. Maugham, p. 13)

The above-presented examples have nouns, which exist only in plural to form idioms “**to spill the beans**” (*to*

reveal a secret) or “*to twiddle one’s thumbs*” (to be idle). If the nouns “beans” and “thumbs” were used in the singular form, the idioms would lose their idiomaticity and become a mere product of compositionality. For instance, “*to twiddle one’s thumb*” would be understood literally and would mean “*to move one of one’s fingers*”, while the phrase “*to spill the bean*” does not exist, as the verb “*spill*” requires either an uncountable or a plural noun.

The changes in noun number are not very common, therefore they do not function with the same freedom as the grammatical tense forms or pronouns do.

The variation of article in idioms is not as free as variation of tense form or number. It behaves more or less according to the grammatical rules. In the majority of cases the article remains stable in the idiom. The same idiom can appear with a different article in different situations:

*She was a useful guest among persons to whom small talk did not come easily, for she was at a loss with a new topic and could be trusted immediately to break **an** awkward **silence** with a suitable observation.* (W. S. Maugham, p. 57)

*He finally broke **the silence**.* “*I think you should better leave. This young man has a lot of question to your wife.*” (Agatha Christie, p. 31)

The presented idiom “*to break the silence*” (to stop the silence by starting to talk or make noises) in a dictionary is used with a definite article like the example in the second sentence, however in the above presented first example the indefinite article “*an*” is used by the author as it is dictated by the rules of English grammar.

To sum up, all the examples prove the divisibility and variability of idioms; they allow syntactic expansion and inversion. There exist a large number of grammatical restraints, i.e., idioms are morphologically or syntactically rigid — admitting no change either. However, these restrictions vary from idiom to idiom — some idioms are more restricted than others. Some idioms allow various kinds of lexical variation, some to a higher — others to the less degree.

Grammatical aspect is very important in the transformation of idioms because all the variations appear under the rules of morphology and syntax.

Idioms vary in “*transparency*”, i.e., whether the meaning of the whole can be derived from the literal meaning of the individual words. The idioms that are “*rather transparent*” in meaning are more open to structural changes than “*less transparent*” ones and vice versa. There has been established a straightforward connection between the transparency and stability or movability of idioms.

Lexico-grammatical environment has got a great impact on semantic structural patterning of idioms; it governs the idiom “*dictating its own rules of functioning*”.

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