Bumping into creative idiomaticity

LUKE PRODROMOU

- 'How every fool doth play upon the word' – *The Merchant of Venice* 3:5
- 'I wanted to blend the two idioms and come up with something new and original and I was sort of punished for that!' – A Polish user of English

JESPERSEN (1904:16–17) described phraseology as an 'indispensable' dimension of language competence, but in 1965 Chomsky banished idiomaticity to the fringes of linguistics, giving pride of place to syntax. It seems, however, that time has vindicated Jespersen's prioritizing of formulaic language. In recent years, the area of phraseology has evolved from its peripheral Chomskyan status to a fundamental role in language discussion, description, and acquisition that can be said to focus on 'creative idiomaticity'.

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of idiomaticity has been variously seen as 'pervasive' (Bolinger, 1961:366; Sinclair, 1991:111; Skehan, 1998:30), 'far from marginal' (Weinert, 1995:184), 'central' (McCarthy, 1998:122; Stubbs, 2001:73), and 'ubiquitous' (Carter, 2004:3). Indeed, Nattinger and DeCarrico have gone so far as to describe 'lexical phrases' as 'the very centre of language acquisition' (1992:xv), while, for Hopper, formulaic usage is so integral a feature of language that it is 'difficult or impossible to draw a line between a formulaic and a non-formulaic expression' (1998:168).

The importance of phraseology has also been highlighted by recent work in corpus linguistics. Indeed, one of the major insights of the corpus analysis of English has been the profoundly phraseological nature of much of what we say and write: 'the foundation of fluency, naturalness, idiomaticity, appropriateness' (Sinclair, 1991:496). In addition, Erman and Warren (2000), in their empirical study of 'the idiom principle', found that as much as 50% of language may be explicable in idiomatic terms.

Ironically, however, it is often those linguists who insist on the *sine qua non* of phraseology in the achievement of fluency who have also noted the elusiveness of idiomaticity for the 'non-native speaker'. Its territory is described through such metaphors as:

'capricious' and 'tyrannical' (Jespersen, 1894:22)
'a jungle' (Bolinger, 1976:9; Sinclair, 1985:254)
'a nuisance' (Coulmas, 1981b:149)
'Janus-faced' and 'protean' (Fernando & Flavell, 1981:3)
'skating on thin ice' (Gibbs, 1986:17)
'elusive' (Yorio, 1989:66)
full of 'pitfalls' (Alexander, 1989:17)
'[a] dangerous minefield' (McCarthy & Carter, 1994:109)
'treacherous' (Altenberg & Granger, 2001:174)
'[a] stumbling block' and 'slippery' (Wray, 2002:ix & 143)
both 'a scourge' and 'anarchic' (Sinclair, 2004:26 & 27).

The conceptualization of idiomaticity as a difficult, even dangerous, area reflects the wide-

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spread view of this central feature of English as a particular challenge in L2 acquisition. The metaphors we use to describe idiomaticity in the learning context reflect the frequently observed phenomenon of L2 learners/users attempting to deploy idiomaticity in spoken language and ending up sounding *dys*fluent and *un*natural: '[C]olorful idioms, even when correctly produced, often sound strange and unnatural when spoken by "non-native speakers" of English' (Irujo, 1986b:299).

Idiomaticity, then, 'sounds' different and comes with great effort in 'non-native' speech; it is where even highly competent L2 users 'are bound to make mistakes, even if [they have] mastered the grammar' (Coulmas, 1981:150).

Why should this be so? Sinclair describes the relationship of idiomaticity to word meaning as 'mysterious' (2004:27), and, comparably, Wray (2002:ix) describes the apparent conflict in the behaviour of idiomaticity in 'native' and 'non-native' speech as a 'mystery'. This mystery is the starting point for the present exploration of the 'puzzle' of idiomaticity in 'non-native-like' fluency.

Creative idiomaticity

Starting from the position that everyday conversation is essentially creative, I will focus here on the manipulation of 'opaque' idioms by L1- and L2-users of English, in order to throw light on the difficulty that idiomaticity presents for even fluent L2 speakers. In this I will draw on my own corpus of L2 spoken discourse (200,000 words) to illustrate the way in which successful L2 speakers share common features with their L1 counterparts while also diverging from them in significant ways, especially in how they use 'creative idiomaticity' for pragmatic purposes. The avowed difficulty of idiomaticity for L2-users is identified as a product of the contradictory nature of lexico-grammar and its deep roots in the socio-cultural context of particular speech communities.

In the first 100,000 words of my L2-user corpus there are virtually no grammatical errors. There are, however, forty non-canonical versions of idiomatic phraseology: see the accompanying table. Why is creative idiomaticity such a rare occurrence in an L2 and why are colourful idioms error-prone in L2 discourse? To begin to answer this question, I will define the sense in which I am using 'creative idiomaticity' here. One can distinguish four types of *creativity* in the literature on phraseology (see Table 1).

Type 1: Transformational-generative (TG) creativity

Chomsky (1965) developed a concept of 'creativity' which refers to the ability of an 'ideal native-speaker' to generate an infinitive number of correct sentences from a finite set of rules. The idiomatic component of the lexicon was however considered to be the *uncreative* (hence 'anomalous') part of the system, as idiomatic phrases were not analysable according to the model of transformational-generative grammar (cf. Chafe, 1968). The irony of the Chomskyan concept of an 'idealized native speaker' is that, in the real world, L2-users frequently achieve a declarative knowledge of the grammatical system of their target language and are able to produce an infinite number of correct sentences.

In the real world, L2-users seem to differ from L1-users in that area of language which, in terms of the generative model, is peripheral: idiomaticity. However, 'generative' creativity is not the kind of creativity I am focusing on in this article.

Type 2: Regular variation

In contrast to the Chomskyan paradigm, it is precisely in the area of idiomaticity that linguists working within performance models of description see the greatest creativity. For Fernando, idioms 'attract wordplay' (1996:2) and 'native-speaker' competence involves knowing when creative idiomaticity permits some modifications but not others. Both Fernando (1996) and Moon (1998) describe regular forms of creativity in the use of pre-fabricated language: forms of creativity which are built into the linguistic system and are therefore, to a large extent, predictable.

We can, for example, say both *on and off* and *off and on*, both *built-in* and *in-built*, both *drag your feet* and *drag your heels*, and both *take the biscuit* and *take the cake*. These variations on fixed phrases are both integral parts of the system and well-established members of the idiomatic canon. Such 'regular variation' of idiomatic phrases is not however the focus of attention in this article.

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TABLE 1: Non-canonical idiomaticity in the SUE Corpus

Type	L1 version	L2 variation
Clichés and fixed expressions	(the) last time for some stupid reason by heart it's a hassle at the back of my mind funny enough in the weekend on the long-run for the time being A great advance on side-effect	in the last-time for one stupid reason from my heart it's a bustle back in my head funnily enough at the weekend in the long-run by the time being a great advancement on a side-product
Pragmatic idioms	what do we call how should I now?	how do we call how could I know?
Collocations	the ordinary user of English a standard, regular question got to the point/made a point leaking oil pre-empt problems do such a thing	the pedestrian user of English a staple question got into a point missing oil waylay problems make such a thing
Binomials and trinomials	in such and such a town wining and dining	in this and this town dining and wining
Colourful idioms	I couldn't make head or tail of it a streak of good luck	I couldn't make heads or tails of it a streak of good luck
Proverbs and sayings	*None*	*none*
Quotations and allusions	*None*	*none*
Discourse markers	for my part in my (personal) opinion	in my part on my personal opinion
Phrasal verbs	Make their own mind up to hand in	make their own mind to hand
Colligations	I couldn't care less making mince-meat of there's no going back on take a chance oriented towards I'm not bothering you established (that) rapport discuss stick in their memory I didn't think twice about it In a just manner	I could care less making a mince-meat of there is no return from take chance oriented for I don't bother you made those rapports discuss about stick to their memory I didn't think about it twice in a justice manner
Compounds	back-up copies	security copies

Type 3: Literary creativity

The way in which poets and prose writers exploit rhetorical and figurative devices (through repetition, hyperbole, metonymy, metaphor, and the like) has been thoroughly researched by literary critics. Many writers from 'non-native' English backgrounds have demonstrated virtuosity in this kind of creativity and have been awarded Nobel and Booker prizes for their work. This is not however what I mean by 'creativity' in this paper, although it overlaps with the 'art of common talk' (Carter, 2004), which is its main focus.

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Type 4: The creativity of everyday speech

The fourth type is the opposite of the first, is more personal and idiosyncratic than Type 2 and less deliberate and artful than Type 3. The 'poetry of everyday speech' (Gibbs, 1994: 265; Hall, 2001:69) is the individual's capacity to be inventive, often on a one-off basis, by coming up, for pragmatic purposes, with a unique refashioning of a fixed phrase. Zili He (1989:150) defines 'creative idiomaticity' as 'the ingenious manipulation of idiomatic expressions normally taken as fixed, which requires cultural or literary awareness and which effects all sorts of subtle variations and surprises.'

Thus, while it is true that much of phraseology is routine and repetitive (cf. Coulmas, 1981, Aijmer, 1996), there are significant areas of phraseology that are constantly reformed in original ways in everyday discourse (Carter, 1997:162). Conversational creativity extends beyond the ability to manipulate idiomatic language in inventive ways; creativity is an inherent quality in everyday speech, not the preserve of linguistically gifted individuals: '[I]t is not a capacity of special people but a special capacity of all people' (Carter & McCarthy, 2004:83).

This ordinary conversational creativity is manifested in the use of figures of speech and imagery (similes, metaphors), hyperbole, slang expressions, idioms, punning, and repetition, and is the outcome of both contextualized interaction and the co-construction of discourse, not a performance by a gifted individual (cf. Tannen, 1989; Moon, 1998; Hall, 2001; Norrick, 200l; Carter, 2004).

Creativity in this broad sense is usually indicative of affective convergence and commonality of viewpoint on the part of the interlocutors, though it can also be a symptom of affective divergence from common ground. Carter and McCarthy make a useful distinction between the more overt manifestations of spoken creativity (metaphorical language, wordplay) on the one hand and the more covert or subliminal creativity of repetition (parallelisms, echoes).

While the creativity of everyday speech – including 'creative idiomaticity' – extends the rhetorical capacity of the L1-user, it adds yet another layer of difficulty for the learner: there are variations on idioms, sayings, and proverbs which are created on the spur of the moment and quite unpredictable. Such moments of idiomatic creativity are invariably the product of interaction between the speakers and what is felt to be appropriate in a particular context. Though some individuals may be more inventive in producing such word-play than others, the creative utterance is a kind of co-construction between speaker and hearer.

In Bakhtin's terms (1981), the creative utterance anticipates the response of the addressee; it is a dialogic process constrained by social context, not a lone cognitive activity inside the head of the gifted individual: 'All understanding is constrained by borders' (Holquist, in Bakhtin, 1986:xix) and the L2-user often does not know where the borders begin and end.

The three examples that follow (author's data) were all uttered by L1-users. They depend on shared knowledge (both substantive and procedural) and are thus the outcome of co-operation between speaker and hearer, in which the conventional boundaries of phraseology are stretched or redefined:

> It's raining kittens and puppies.
> < *Common expression* 'It's raining cats and dogs.'

> What seems to have got twisted is somebody's knickers.
> < *Common informal, especially British, expression* 'She/He got her/his knickers in a twist.'

> It's like putting the cat before the horse.
> < *Common expression* 'putting the cart before the horse'

Such language play and creativity often take the form of verbal duels, informal contests of wit and repartee, jokes, riddles, puns, repetitions and variations of previous language, and a whole range of ways of playing with formulaic expressions and especially idioms, all of which can be called *creative idiomaticity*. Sperber and Wilson (1981) have considered such usage in terms of 'echoic' speech and irony.

Language play is full of contradictions. It can serve the needs of collaboration and convergence between interlocutors and it can be aggressive and disruptive (cf. Beltz, 2001). It involves the flouting of expectations of conventional regularities in language but depends on an intimate familiarity with those conventions. The disruptive function of language play is often humorous but is also often deployed to deflate official solemnity and even subvert

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authority (cf. Bakhtin, 1984). Indeed, Beltz (2001:131) argues that the inversion of the established order, whether grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic, may be an appropriate interpretive frame for investigations of learner identity and agency in post-'native speaker' approaches to SLA, where learners are not necessarily conceptualized as 'defective communicators in pursuit of an idealized target language native speaker norm' (Beltz, 2001:131).

Exit L2-user, pursued by idiom

The participants in Example 4 (below) are at an international conference in Brazil. It is the coffee break. Bill, Luke, Rob, and Jane are native speakers of English, and Ignatio is Brazilian. Bill is a professor of applied linguistics. Ignatio has been asking Bill about postgraduate study in the UK.

Bill Well, I'll have to be going now.
Luke Yes, 'We'll rise and go now…'
Bill I should have gone some time ago.
Jane [looking at a nearby tape-recorder] This is still working…. This is still running.
Luke What's the use of running?
Rob [from nearby] Your conversation may be recorded. Quality control.
Ignatio [focused on his sole reason for being there] When will I know the outcome?
Bill I'll just go and have a look at the bookstand
Luke Make your stand there OK jolly good.
Rob He's just got a suspicious mind.
Bill Yes.
Luke [sings] Caught in a trap….
Ignatio Are you – Are you…?
Rob When he sings there are some words he doesn't quite know and he glosses over them. [sings] 'We can't go on together with suspicious minds.'

Ignatio is present at a speech event where the L1 speakers co-construct the dialogue by drawing on a number of cultural allusions and then playing on the literal and metaphorical meanings of these lexical items. He looks on, like Romeo at the Capulets' ball, while the L1-users delight in echoic mention of poetry, pop-music, fixed expressions, quotations, and fragments from other genres.

The L1-users confirm the depth of what binds them both by drawing on the common store of idiomatic allusions and deploying a range of devices for reinforcing convergence. I will focus here on the 'dialogic' elements in the conversation, which are interwoven throughout the discourse, across different speaker turns, and act as a device for building discourse coherence. The relatively complex dialogue includes:

echoic mention (of a poem by Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree')
fixed expressions ('to make a stand,' 'what's the use of running?')
a pop-song ('Suspicious Minds')
an allusion (to a more formal genre: 'your conversation may be recorded')
an ironic echo (of an informal and socially distinct genre: 'jolly good')

The L1-users' discourse is pieced together incrementally and held together, from turn to turn, through the manipulation of fixed expressions. Luke's poetic statement of intention, *we will arise and go now* initiates the sequence of dialogic wordplay. The allusion is taken up by Bill, who uses it to bring the conversation back to the prosaic here-and-now: *I should have gone some time ago*.

A second stretch of conversation is also given unity by creative wordplay across turns. Jane makes a literal, declarative statement about the fact that the tape-recorder is still 'running' (lines 3–4). Luke picks up this lexical item *running* and 'metaphoricizes' it, transforming a literal expression into an idiomatic allusion: *what's the use of running?* We see a similar process a few utterances later when the literal lexical item *stand* (as in *bookstand*) is idiomaticised into *make a stand* ('resist'). Rob takes Luke's play on *stand* as ironic and replies with *He's just got a suspicious mind*. Luke extends the allusion of *suspicious minds* to an Elvis Presley song by quoting a catchphrase from it: *(we're) caught in a trap*. Rob synthesizes the mock-conflict of the first two speakers by quoting a longer chunk from the same song: *we can't go on together with suspicious minds.*

Normal conversation has been taken over by a playful dialogue largely strung together with echoes of generic varieties, in which the L1 speakers dominate; the L2 user, Ignatio, hardly gets a word in and doesn't get involved in the dialogic wordplay. The reason for this peripheralization of the L2-user in such contexts might be that creativity with institutionalized phrases can only be indulged if exposed to a set of culturally familiar scenarios (cf. Tannen, 1989:43).

The echoes of diverse generic forms in conversation can be seen as a 'dialogue' between, on the one hand, the expected uses and conno-

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tations of a word or phrase and, on the other, the use actually selected (or invented) in a specific instance (cf. Louw, 1993). The ironic humour is also a result of the difference between previous use and present mention (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1981), and the ironic effect of such prosodic features as stress, loudness, tone of voice, and snatches of old familiar tunes. Such informal conversation is dialogic in that the words the speakers use are 'saturated' by previous use, and engage in a 'verbal masquerade'; the words are 'shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents' (Bakhtin, 1981: 276/293).

An intriguing suggestion here is that 'idiomaticity attracts idiomaticity': an idiomatic allusion does not occur in isolation but in the company of other such allusions: the idiomatic wordplay of one speaker stimulates a response in kind by other speakers. If L2-users are to take part in such diffuse interplay they must be able to sustain this kind of interaction across turns and across idiomatic types.

This dialogue of forms, meanings, intentions, and punning echoes of previous use constructs an interplay between constraint and creativity. Such creativity presupposes an important role for the speech community, the knowledge of speech genres, and the subliminal memory of frequent encounters with idiomatic strings in pragmatic contexts; the configuration of meanings and genres is the outcome of recurrent experience from an early age on into adulthood. Similarly, the knowledge of informal conversation and the place of idiomaticity in the sub-genre of friendly 'banter' is the fruit of long socio-historical processes and repeated encounters with the members of the speech community expressing themselves through such a repertoire.

The re-construction of such recurrent lifelong experience by EFL students – in the classroom, for short spurts of time, in a context poor in human interaction – is a formidable task requiring 'immense talent and dedication' (Sinclair 1992:496). In the next section, we look at a SUE who seems to have achieved such idiomatic competence, a state of affairs which we can think of as Type 5.

Re-enter L2-user

Dimitri (whose first languages are Greek and Spanish) is in conversation with a native-speaker of English, in which both speakers manipulate a shared knowledge of idioms to create both humour and speaker convergence.

Dimitri There is this concept of work ethic, to do something because you want to do it and if you want to do it well; there's the old English saying 'If a job's worth doing it's worth doing well,'…er … er…
Luke Now it seems the. .. er... motto is more like 'If you're going to do something, do it as profitably as possible'.
Dimitri Which usually tends to be well.
Luke It… It… It can help
Dimitri Because of competition. Competition makes it that if you don't do it well, 'forget about it'.
Luke You see another saying which I think the Americans have is 'if it ain't broke…'
Dimitri '… don't fix it.'

In this exchange, notably, it is the L2 speaker who initiates the sequence of idiomatic expressions and indeed demonstrates a 'meta-idiomatic' awareness when he refers explicitly to the fact that he is resurrecting a somewhat 'musty' expression: *there's the old English saying*. The L1-user takes up the conscious 'mention' of idioms in his use of the word *motto* and initiates an example of the process McCarthy (1998) refers to as 're-lexicalisation'. In contrast to the idiomatic stereotype, it is the L1-user who responds to the L2-user's variation on a canonical formula: *if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well*.

Convergence is clearly established between the two speakers through these idiomatic devices, and is intensified by Dimitri's relative clause *which usually tends to be well,* dovetailing neatly across turns with his interlocutor's utterance. At the same time, Dimitri's completion of Luke's variation on a well-known saying (line 7, '*which…*') constitutes a variation on a variation.

The idiomatic thread is taken up again in Dimitri's contributing yet another verbal echo of the original saying in *if you don't do it well* followed by a syntactic variation: *forget about it.* The round of idiomatic one-upmanship is taken in another direction by the L1-user, who introduces an echoic and elliptical mention of another saying: *If it ain't broke (don't fix it*) – the rest of the fragment being completed by his L2 partner. Thus, the two speakers weave in and out of each other's utterances, co-constructing the dialogue, through their shared knowledge of both grammatical and idiomatic

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devices. It is English as a lingua franca in full flight, with the interlocutors in perfect dialogic counterpoint.

The idiomatic deficit

However, the course of verbal play does not always run so smooth, even for proficient L2-users. The persistence of the 'deficit' view of L2-user phraseology may cause the kind of fluent creative idiomaticity displayed by Dimitri to boomerang in pragmatic terms. The kind of resistance from 'native-speakers' that 'non-native' creative use of English may encounter is captured in the following description by a Polish SUE, and is in effect a Type 6 situation:

> *Greg* When you try and play with idioms, like those fixed ones... er... you know there was this… this party we had, you know, 'dine and wine' excessive, I would say, the… erm... next day I said that… something like ... er... 'I was drinking like a horse' and... er... then I was told that you say 'drink like a fish' but 'eat like a horse' and ... er... my intention was that there was so much to drink and to eat that I wanted to… I wanted to blend the two idioms and come up with something new and original and I was sort of 'punished' for that (*laughs*).

The speaker bemoans the fact that his fabrication of what he refers to as a 'fused formula' ('drinking like a horse') backfired (Tannen, 1989:41). It was perceived as an error by his native-speaker interlocutor. But as Tannen points out, the blending of two or more set expressions is normal and meaningful in native-speaker discourse: 'The language is mistake-proof' says Tannen (42). I would add however that it is 'mistake-proof' *for the L1-user* but clearly not for the L2-user of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), as the experience of the Polish user testifies. This may have something to do with the fact that L1-users make the pragmatics of 'mentioning' clear (through phonological features and gesture as well as the lexical choices made in the co-text as a whole), while L2-users may fail to signal the fact that they are 'mentioning' and are therefore heard only as 'using' (or 'misusing') an expression.

It is also possible, of course, that the speaker's attempt at being witty with idioms was infelicitous because the blend is simply not funny. It might be that it was not received by the 'native-speaker' interlocutor as either 'ingenious' or 'subtle' and the only 'surprise' element involved was that the speaker thought it witty in the first place. As Carter (1999) and Norrick (1984) both point out there is an element of risk in displays of wit in informal conversation and the embarrassing spectre of an attempted witticism falling flat is ever-present, for both L1- and L2-users (Carter, 1999: 209).

It may well be that the risks involved when an L2-user undertakes to be playfully metaphorical in English are greater than when an L1-user does so, simply because of limited linguistic resources. There may also be socio-cultural factors at work which influence the attitude of the interlocutor in terms of ownership of the language and questions of identity.

When a proficient user of ELF attempts to play this game of humorously unpacking idiomatic expressions the result is often pragmatic failure: the subliminal becomes conscious, the implicit becomes explicit, and the event is seen not as 'creative play' but an error, a state of affairs which may be regarded as Type 7:

> *Nick* (a Greek SUE): As a 'non-native speaker' I am not as free as native speakers to use the language creatively and idiomatically. For instance, yesterday I said something to a group of teachers and one of them commented 'You can say that again!' Humorously, I said 'OK, I'll say it again' and repeated myself more emphatically. Embarrassingly, she said, 'No, I actually meant that I agreed with you.' The assumption was, of course, that the meaning of the idiom had been lost on me!

It is ironic that a speaker's attempts at verbal play are misconstrued as linguistic incompetence, given a similar rhetorical ploy in the following excerpt from the popular British comedy television series, *Fawlty Towers*. In the following example, Basil Fawlty, 'unpacks' or literalizes the set expression *you can say that again* in an identical fashion to the proficient user of ELF in the extract above, but Fawlty, as is his wont, manipulates the idiom with aplomb:

> *Sybil* No, Polly doesn't forget things
> *Basil* Doesn't she?
> *Sybil* Can you remember the last time she did?
> *Basil* No, I can't but then my memory isn't very good.
> *Sybil* You can say that again.
> *Basil* Can I, dear? Oh, thank you…. I've forgotten what it was.
>
> (Cleese & Booth, 1975)

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Basil's playful literalizing of *you can say that again* does not establish commonality with his wife but creates ironic distance. Irony, sarcasm, and humour are some of the attitudinal effects available through the creative use of idiomaticity. The example from *Fawlty Towers* illustrates the way idiomatic creativity and phonological manipulation reinforce each other to create such effects: Basil's ironic response to Sybil depends on his ignoring the stress on *that* which the conventional idiomatic meaning of *you can say <u>that</u> again* requires. Instead, Basil responds as if Sybil had stressed *again,* which would be the expected nuclear stress if the string *you can say that <u>again</u>* were being selected on the open-choice principle. Basil also breaks a rule that fixed expressions are not normally followed by tags (Fernando & Flavell, 1981).

Both players in this game of verbal ping-pong also know the semantic and pragmatic effect of such bending of the rules; they are also share an awareness of the (especially British) ironic tone of voice. Basil's 'Can I dear? Oh, thank you…' is in phonological quotation marks: 'Every word used "with conditions attached", every word enclosed in intonational quotation marks, is likewise an intentional hybrid' (Bakhtin, 1981:76).

Basil's response is 'double-accented' and the whole exchange is a good example of the dialogic nature of the utterance and even of individual lexical items (Bakhtin, 1981:304). The to-and-fro of meanings embodied in words, idiomatic phrases, and phonology is a constitutive feature of L1 speaker discourse; competence in manipulating the mesh of collocational and phonological potential for ironic or echoic effect is intimately bound up with what it means to be a fluent member of a speech community.

In my corpus, in contrast to the L1-user's subliminal phraseological competence, highly proficient L2-users often demonstrate a self-consciousness when producing collocations, which is not apparent on the grammatical level:

Tomas I wouldn't lift – what is it, an eyebrow? What is it that you do?
Luke 'Raise an eyebrow.'
Tomas 'Raise an eyebrow.' I wouldn't raise an eyebrow.

The next example shows another SUE expressing hesitation and doubt in the context of creative collocations:

Tania They just brought the whole conference down ... er... the 'whole house', you would say. Is that the right idiom?
Luke 'Brought the house down.'
Tania 'Yeah, yeah. That's right.'

These examples suggest that the process of constructing idiomatic collocation, for the L2-user, may be more analytic than holistic (Wray, 2002: 205–211).

Bumping into creativity

'Nursery rhymes and songs are very much the basis of my own English and allow me to understand and share things cultural that to a great extent surprise some natives: "You're not supposed to know things like Little Jack Horner and Litlle Miss Muffet, José!"' – José, a SUE and teacher trainer in Uruguay

What is considered creative in the mouth of the L1-user is often seen as a deviation in the mouth of even the most advanced successful bilingual user of the language. Thus, the acceptability or otherwise of creative collocations has very much to do with the perceived 'authenticity' of the utterance and the authority bestowed upon those who embody such 'authenticity' (Widdowson, 1998).

It is ironic that the L2 speaker's attempts at verbal play are misconstrued as linguistic incompetence. The L2 speaker, as Thomas points out (1982:96), does not seem to have the same right to break the rules as does the 'native speaker':

> [T]eachers and linguists fail to admit the possibility of a foreign student's flouting conventions in the same way as they fail to allow him/her to innovate linguistically – in fact, the foreign learner is usually expected to be hypercorrect, both grammatically and pragmatically.

This ability to transgress the shared system is a kind of creative versatility that marks out the speaker as a member of a cultural club to which access is limited.

Does the 'native-speaker' exist?

These assumptions about creativity in L1 and L2 speaker discourse were explored in a survey I conducted with 400 teachers of English. In this closing section, I will first report one more instance of collocational creativity by successful users of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), then the results of the survey into how

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this creativity was received by L1- and L2-users from around the world. Here are examples of unusual collocations with the prepositional verb *bump into* produced by two different L2 speakers:

> I'm always very glad when for example I bump into a new expression….
> [T]his means that he or she is going to bump into 'although' at least thirteen times.

Sensing that something was not quite as one would have expected with these collocations, I looked up *bump into* in a corpus-based dictionary (Rundell, 2002). According to this dictionary, *bump into* does not normally collocate with abstract nouns such as *a new expression* or a word like *although.* Here is part of the dictionary entry for this verb (Rundell, 2002):

> **Bump into (sb)** To meet someone unexpectedly: I bumped into your mother at the supermarket
> **Bump into (sth)** To accidentally hit against something: As I turned round, I bumped into a filing cabinet

Turning, however, to the concordance lines for *bump into* in the British National Corpus, which is an L1-user corpus, I found these attested examples of *bump into:*

1 The way sound and vision copulate is what makes their music and ideas always a thrill to bump into.
2 Something tells me you may bump into a little politics on the way.

On the face of it, it seemed that what was possible for L1-users was 'out of bounds' for L2-users. In order to investigate this hypothesis, I conducted an e-mail survey of 400 teachers and other ELT professionals, both L1- and L2-users, from a wide range of countries, to gauge attitudes towards creativity in 'native' and 'non-native' speakers. The question I set was very simple (see Figure 1).

I sent out the question in two versions: 200 teachers were informed that the sentence had been produced by a 'native-speaker' and 200 were told it had been produced by a 'non-native speaker'. The aggregate responses to these questions are summed up in Figure 2.

This survey seems to confirm the existence of a contradiction in what is considered legitimate for 'native-speakers' and 'non-native speakers' to do with collocation. When my respondents thought the sample utterance belonged to a native-speaker they were overwhelmingly positive in their attitude, but the opposite was true in the case where the speaker was assumed to be a non-native speaker. Many respondents added comments explaining their choice of answer; some explicitly articulated a different attitude to creativity in English when the language is L1 and when it is L2. The following comment from an L1-user is typical: 'I must admit I'd be happier with this from a NS than a NNS!'

It seems that *non-* can make a difference to people's attitudes towards creativity in language use.

The simultaneous existence of collocational norms and the potential for violating these norms is a defining feature of L1 competence and, at the same time (paradoxically) it seems to be – as Medgyes (1994) has argued – one of the defining features of the limits of 'non-native' competence, even at advanced levels. Many writers have identified the way idiomaticity is embedded in culture (for esample: He, 1989; Alexander, 1992), which carries the conceptual knowledge that a child begins to acquire at school and at bedtime, through games and nursery rhymes. It is on this kind of

Would you say this sentence is 'acceptable' English?

I'm always very glad when for example I bump into a new expression …

Yes ___ **No ___**

Underline: I am a native/non-native speaker of English

Figure 1 The *bump into* questionnaire

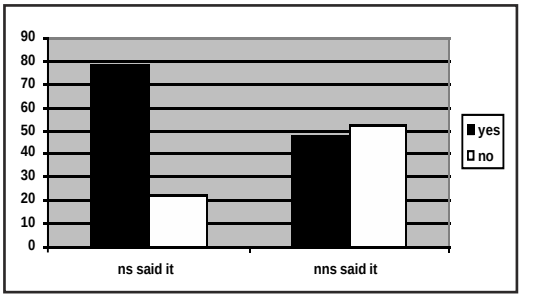


Figure 2 Native/non-native speakers' responses to the acceptability of *bump into* (% 400 responses)

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knowledge that later more sophisticated creative play is built. The L1 speaker gains idiomatic competence (of which creative idiomaticity is the most sophisticated expression) after years of immersion, from childhood to adulthood, in the cultural context in which the language is embedded. Expressions of irony, sarcasm, or humour, packaged in their appropriate phonology and repeated countless times, become routinized in everyday discourse (cf. Coulmas, 1981).

Conclusion: idiomaticity and an emerging ELF

In this article, I have identified what I see as a paradox at work in the relationship between ENL and ELF, whereby the same linguistic features produce opposite effects in L1 and L2 speakers. The difficulty of acquiring and implementing idiomatic shared knowledge is both linguistic and sociolinguistic – it has as much to do with attitudes and culture as it has to do with forms and meanings.

Fluency as an L1-user is built on the four kinds of 'shared knowledge' put forward by Sinclair (1992: 496–8): a subliminal mastery of phraseology; knowledge of grammar and lexis; linguistic inference (activated by cohesive devices such as ellipsis and substitution); and aspects of the culture, signaled nowhere in the text, but which just have to be known. To Sinclair's list, we could add: first, 'situational ellipsis', where items not signaled in the text are recoverable not from the co-text but from the wider context of situation (Carter & McCarthy, 1995), and, second, a tendency for idiomatic phenemona to appear in networks rather than in single one-off occurrences.

The subliminal command of thousands of phrases and sentences (Pawley & Syder, 1983) is only the tip of the iceberg of 'native-like fluency'. Linguistic and cultural inference, lexical cohesion, an intuitive awareness of connotation, skilful use of repetition, quotative competence, and, finally, the weaving together of all these features in the co-production of on-line speech, are all part of the big picture of L1 fluency. Fluency in this framework involves an incremental co-construction of discourse by speakers who, rather than fulfilling a grand grammatical design, seem to be stitching together chunks of language as and when the need arises. This rhapsodic discourse is based on a dialogic orientation towards both language and the other speaker(s) in the dialogue, and is thus 'based on a here-and-now view of what the speaker is doing; and this perception co-operatively takes into account the listener's here-and-now point of view (Brazil, 1995:222–223).

The challenge of the 'on-line' processing of creative language in spontaneous speech in the here-and-now intersubjectivity of dialogue may explain why word-play is not everybody's conversational cup-of-tea. The processing effort invested in interpreting the unusual combination of words and meanings is not always rewarded with a successful pragmatic outcome: for example, the pleasure found in achieving a humorous effect, in economically expressing complex ideas, or in yoking together heterogeneous ideas (cf. Norrick, 1984). Disappointment and frustration are more likely in the case of L2-users looking in from the outside on L1 language games.

In terms of Hoey's theory of 'lexical priming' (2005), the role of memory and the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to phraseology, in the specific instances of pragmatic use that this model presupposes, goes some way to explaining L1-users' competence, but raises questions regarding the access of L2-users to the conditions that make this fluency possible. Speech routines, incremental construction of discourse, collocations, and semantic prosody are the very stuff of fast and fluent 'native' discourse, but the paradox is that these are the areas which pre-suppose sustained immersion in a speech community, which – for most L2-users of English – is easier said than done.

Of course, the task of acquiring idiomaticity is only a problem if one sets up L1 forms as the norm for English as a Lingua Franca. The question is whether L1-like idiomaticity is a valid strand in the tapestry of ELF. L1-users deploy their mother tongue from a position of deep commonality and, as a rule, L2-users of that language don't. This means that, as far as idiomaticity is concerned, L1-users are 'playing at home', with rules they can bend according to need. L2-users are 'playing away', and, if they break the rules, they are penalized. One begins to wonder just how fixed the rules governing language play are. After all, several of the SUEs in my corpus display undoubted skill in the manipulation of idiom, if not in the free-wheeling creativity that is the very stuff of common talk in L1 informal conversation. And they seem to have an intuition for where their limits

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are, as far as idiomaticity is concerned: they keep away from minefields. ■

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