Idiomaticity and the non-native speaker

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'Ay, but "while the grass grows…" the proverb is something musty' (*Hamlet*, Act 3 Scene 2)

IN THIS ARTICLE, I describe the paradox of idiomaticity in native and non-native uses of English. I identify some of the causes of this paradox and look at some of the implications of the idiomatic paradox for English as a Lingua Franca.

Fixed expressions that are not so fixed

The flexible nature of 'fixed expressions' is one of the many paradoxes one encounters when dealing with idiomatic language, and while such paradoxes are the stuff of which creativity in the use of idioms is made (Tannen, 1989), for the non-native speaker they may constitute an obstacle to acquisition of that feature of the language.

The ability to play with language is universal and the tendency to play with idioms is a normal feature of everyday language use, whether written or spoken (Carter, 1999). Newspapers are notorious for their inventive approach to idioms in making up eye-catching headlines:

> 'Every silver lining has a cloud' (*Observer*, 7 Jul 02)

The above headline reverses the normal word order in a well-known saying. The next example, is however, more obscure:

> 'The man who came to rue Britannia' (*Independent on Sunday*, 7 Jul 02)

The article in the newspaper was about a conductor trying to change tradition at the Proms whereby at the end of the concert the orchestra plays the patriotic tune 'Rule Britannia'. The reforming conductor's efforts were in vain; thus 'rue', an old-fashioned literary word for regret. In this case, the newspaper is drawing on both linguistic and cultural allusions.

Such playful headlines, then, conceal a great deal of culture which learners may or may not be familiar with but will benefit from if they wish to appreciate creative uses of language.

The poetry of everyday speech

Novelists or poets are, by definition, creative in their approach to the language, including the subversion of well-known expressions. Playful creativity is indeed a defining feature of literary language (cf. Jakobson, 1960). However, we also find such creativity in non-literary uses of language; here are two examples from the British National Corpus of written and spoken English:

> 'It never rains but it snows might be Mongolia's national motto'
> 'With friends like that who needs Fleet Street?'

For more examples of creativity based on the idiomatic expression 'with friends like that who needs enemies?', see Zwicky and Zwicky, 1986.

The creativity of everyday speech is less widely recognized than creativity in the written medium. The way creativity is linked with the potential for playing with idiomatic expressions has been explored by several writers: see, for example, Tannen, 1989, and Carter, 1999. In the following example, from my own data, the driver of a car addresses two friends sitting in the back seats of the car; the passengers have been deep in conversation and have forgotten to fasten their seat belts:

> 'You'll have to belt up, you two.'

This comment brings together two idiomatic expression: belt up meaning both 'shut up' and

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'do up' or 'fasten', and manipulates both the literal and metaphorical meanings of 'belt'. The love of puns and wordplay, often based on idiomatic sayings, is a common feature of native-speaker uses of English, as in:

(Two friends in a pub after a long drive)
Things can only get bitter.

Here, 'bitter' is both a reference to a kind of beer and a pun on 'better'.

What is striking about informal uses of English is not only how common the 'idiom principle' is (cf. Sinclair, 1987), but just how common creativity with idioms is among native-speakers. The 'idiom principle', however, is a much broader concept than 'idiom' as I am using it here: '[T]he principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments' (Sinclair, 1991:110).

'Idioms' such as 'every cloud has a silver lining' are but a small – albeit a colourful – part of the idiom principle, which makes up at least 50% of all language use (Erman and Warren, 2000), and includes a very wide range of prefabricated items.

The *OED* (1989) definition of *idiom* highlights the potential difficulties idioms may present for the non-native speaker: 'a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one'. This definition suggests a feature of language that does not fit into the regular patterns of syntactic frames and the dictionary definitions of words. The collocation of 'peculiarity' and 'usage' in the *OED* definition provides a potential clue to the unique difficulties faced by 'non-native speakers' wishing to acquire 'native-like' idiomaticity.

I will use the term *idiom* here to refer to so-called 'pure idioms', such as *spill the beans* or *kick the bucket*, where the meaning of the unit is opaque, often metaphorical, and the lexicogrammar is severely restricted. I will use the terms *idiomaticity* and *phraseology* as umbrella words for the general tendency of words to go together, equivalent to Sinclair's broad definition of the 'idiom principle'.

Idiomaticity everywhere

Pawley and Syder (1983), in a much-quoted article, assert that the native-speaker knows thousands of lexical phrases or lexical sentence stems and this knowledge accounts for 'native-like fluency'; lexico-grammatical phrases form 'the main building blocks of fluent connected speech'. They admit that the connection between such phrases and native-like fluency is only 'a claim' and 'can be tested only by examining spoken discourse' (1983:214).

The examination of authentic spoken discourse was not slow in coming. In the 1980s and 1990s, corpus linguists working on large collections of spoken and written texts, such as the *COBUILD* Bank of English and the British National Corpus, confirmed the importance of phraseology in naturally-occurring native-speaker discourse: 'The principle of idiom is far more pervasive and elusive than we have allowed so far… [M]ost of the text will be interpretable by the idiom principle' (Sinclair, 1991:111–114).

Not only has the overwhelming presence of idiomaticity been confirmed by corpus research, but it is also thought to be an essential pre-condition for native-speaker fluency:

> Native speakers' unconscious knowledge of collocation is an essential component of their idiomatic and fluent language use and an important part of their communicative competence… [A] large amount of language use consists of words occurring in conventional combinations. Such collocations are not an idiosyncratic and peripheral phenomenon but a central characteristic of language in use.
>
> — Stubbs, 2001:73

Carter and McCarthy (1997), focusing on a corpus of informal spoken English, confirm the significance of phraseology in native-speaker discourse but go further in exploring the pragmatic function of idiomatic or 'fixed expressions': '[F]ixed expressions play an important part in spoken language in particular in maintaining and stabilizing relationships…' (p. 15).

Idioms and the non-native speaker

From the above, it would seem that the way for a student of English to become more fluent in the language is not only to have a good command of grammar and vocabulary but also a good command of the 'idiom principle'. Indeed, the need for greater idiomatic competence is precisely what linguists propose for the non-native speaker. In the past, teachers have had access to thorough and systematic accounts of the grammatical system and dictionaries to

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help them teach English; these pedagogic tools were not, however, based on naturally occurring English, and as a result, argues Sinclair (1987:159), students' language tends to sound unnatural:

> (Learners) rely on larger, rarer and clumsier words which make their language sound stilted and awkward. This is certainly not their fault nor is it the fault of their teachers, who can only work within the kind of language descriptions that are available.

In the post-corpus era, as a result of the work done by the *COBUILD* team and others, more accurate description of how native-speakers use the language have become available and the new insights we have are, above all, phraseological:

> [N]ow we can have access to much more reliable information and learners will be able to produce with confidence much more idiomatic English with less effort involved.
>
> — Sinclair (1987:159).

Another reason given why idiomaticity is necessary for students is that it makes language more 'real'. Fox urges teachers to raise students' awareness of 'how native-speakers use English out there in the real world' (1998:42). The way native speakers use English in the 'real' world is, of course, largely idiomatic and it is assumed that a fluent non-native speaker should be similarly idiomatic. Fox notes (p. 33):

> When even very good learners of the language speak or write English the effect is slightly odd. There is nothing that is obviously wrong, but somehow native speakers know that they would not express themselves in quite that way. The problem is often one of collocation.
>
> — Fox (1998: 33).

The transition from descriptions of native-speaker competence to prescriptions for the EFL classroom is most obvious in pedagogic materials. Lewis (1994, 1997, 2000) has now published a series of handbooks for teachers on the importance of collocation, with suggestions for how to teach it. Wright (1999), in his introduction to a practice book of idioms for students, explains why students need to become more idiomatic:

> [Idioms] are important because they are very common. It is impossible to speak, read or listen to English without meeting idiomatic language. This is not something you can leave until you reach an advanced level. All native speaker English is idiomatic.
>
> — Wright (1999:9).

There is, it seems, an impressive line-up of experts arguing for the need to teach more idiomatically. However, the mystery of idiomaticity is that if it is so fundamental to speech why is it that even advanced students do not seem to acquire very much of it and why is it so error-prone? (cf. Lennon, 1991) In this context, Krashen's distinction (1985) between learning and acquisition is helpful: students seem to manage to 'learn' idioms and recognize them in tests, but they do not seem acquire them; idioms do not easily pass into students' active and spontaneous production of speech. (See, for example: Baigent, 1996; Lennon, 1996; Arnaud and Savignon, 1997; and on students' written work and collocation, Howarth, 1998.)

One possible explanation put forward by the pro-idiomatic lobby is that students do not achieve idiomatic fluency because they have not been taught from natural descriptions of language based on 'real' data; but corpora of 'real' English, the argument goes, have now made available a 'repository of facts on which new syllabi and materials can be based' (Sinclair, 1987:158). More specifically, Lewis (2000) attributes idiomatic failure to lack of teaching and training in 'noticing' strategies:

> The reason so many students are not making any perceived progress is simply because they have not been trained to notice which words go with which. — Lewis (2000:14).

McCarthy and Carter (1995) also identify faulty pedagogy as responsible for the lack of progress in the acquisition of more natural 'spoken grammar' and propose an awareness-raising methodology which, like Lewis' suggestion, also entails 'noticing', as a good route to 'more rapid acquisition by learners of fluent, accurate and naturalistic conversational and communicative skills' (McCarthy and Carter, 1995:217).

The classroom *v.* the real world

The problem with assigning responsibility for the lack of progress in students' acquisition of idioms to classroom procedures, whether on the level of materials or methods, is that this line of reasoning assumes that the only significant input students get is in the language class, from the teacher and the explicit input of the

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syllabus or textbook. Indeed, beginners or even advanced students, especially in an EFL as opposed to ESL context, may not have had much contact with real English outside the classroom.

If their teacher was a non-native speaker using materials which neglected to focus on idiomaticity it is possible that one could reach a reasonable level of English without ever having to encounter or engage with idiomatic language. One may then conclude quite reasonably that the students' language might have been more idiomatic if 'real English' had been taught from the early stages of formal learning.

If we look at the higher levels of language learning we find there is, in fact, greater emphasis on idiomatic language. While the phraseological items tested in the Cambridge First Certificate Use of English examination account for about 20–25% of all items tested, at Proficiency level the percentage rises to about 70%. Indeed, the Cambridge examiners make the idiomatic and cultural nature of the Proficiency explicit in the following specification:

> At this level, the learner is approaching the linguistic competence of an educated native speaker and is able to use the language in a variety of culturally appropriate ways.
>
> — UCLES, *CPE Handbook*, 2002

Thus, many advanced course materials, which teach to examinations such as the Cambridge Proficiency, are defined as such by their (perhaps belated) focus on idiomaticity. Why, then, are idioms stubbornly resistant to acquisition?

Idiomaticity and the successful user

Idiomaticity, according to Medgyes (1994), is one of the acid-tests of native-speaker competence and distinguishes even the most sophisticated non-native user of the language from the native-speaker: '[pseudo-native speakers] have a lower or higher level of idiomaticity than average' (Medgyes, 1994:15). His views are echoed by Pawley and Syder, who however maintain the assumption that native-like fluency may be possible, if late, in coming: 'fluency in spontaneous connected speech may take the adult learner of a foreign language years to achieve' (1983:199).

Leaving aside the question of whether students aspire to become 'pseudo-native speakers' at all, Medgyes' claim that even successful non-native speakers show their insecurity with idiomatic language, either by avoiding it or overdoing it, is borne out by research studies: see, for example, Arnaud and Savigon (1997) and Howarth (1998). Medgyes does not explain why idiomaticity should be so elusive, but other aspects of his definition of the 'pseudo-native speaker' may provide a clue which will throw light on the idiomatic mystery. He identifies cultural and conceptual factors as further distinguishing features between native and 'pseudo-native' speakers, who 'have gaps in the conceptual knowledge usually acquired by children during their linguistically most formative years (games, stories, nursery songs…and so on' (1994:13).

What is interesting about Medgyes' definition of high-flying non-native speakers and their idiomatic and (native-)cultural limits, is that the gaps he highlights in their sociolinguistic make-up are the very qualities which linguists identify as definitive of native-speakerness. We have seen the pervasive importance of idiomaticity in ENL, but definitions of the native speaker often foreground the conceptual knowledge acquired in childhood as a precondition for achieving native-speaker status (cf. Davies, 1991).

Shared knowledge

Early childhood experience of language is one way of acquiring a native-like intuition, but the concept of the native-speaker is far more subtle and complex than accidents of birth or even childhood experiences. A more sensitive criterion of the nature of native-speaker competence seems to be the shared knowledge of language and culture; Sinclair (1992) focuses on the following as defining features of native-like fluency:

- a subliminal mastery of phraseology
- the ability to make linguistic and textual inferences
- a knowledge of aspects of culture which are not signaled anywhere in the text but which are nonetheless known

Pawley (1986) refers to idioms as 'culturally salient' and Carter and McCarthy see the ellipsis in everyday idiomatic speech as part and parcel of the 'cultural commonality' shared by native speakers: '[I]t is their very fixedness and cultural commonality which makes them good candidates for ellipsis – the unspoken elements

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of the message can always be assumed to be known' (1995:147).

Here are examples from naturally-occurring data of fixed expressions, with variations and an explicit reference to the fact that the speaker or writer is drawing on the cultural common store (all from the British National Corpus):

- 'Spades are the worst. What's the old saying? A bad workman always trusts his tools.'
- 'The old adage that a bad workman always blames his tools is borne out.'
- 'Similarly, a bad workman cannot blame witchcraft for his poor craftsmanship.'

This conscious and playful reference to the act of using idioms as one is actually doing so is part of a 'meta-idiomatic awareness' that native-speakers seem to share.

Sauce for the goose

Thus, as I have argued in this article, the cultural nature of idiomaticity is an essential part of the native-speaker's make-up. But there is an aspect of native-speaker competence which is even more crucial than cultural idiomaticity: the power to transgress the shared system. If one knows the way phraseology works, if one belongs to the speech community which shares the system and is defined by its cultural norms, then one can bend and break its rules and patterns, as the examples in this article have demonstrated. However, we now face the following question: Is the non-native-speaker allowed to 'transgress the shared the shared system'? Prabhu (1995:288) has this to say on the difference between native and non-native speakers and their power to bend the rules of idiomaticity:

> [I]nsofar as one sees oneself as (or is seen to be) a learner, not a participant of the shared system, one's transgressions count as deviations from the shared system…not contributions to or influence on it.

In simple English, this means that sauce for the native-speaking goose is not sauce for the non-native speaker gander. Wright (1999:7) warns his non-native readers that an idiom 'is fixed and is recognized by native speakers. You cannot make up your own.' But the fact is, native-speakers are constantly making up their own.

Assuming the non-native-speaker has the competence in the language and the confidence to break the rules creatively, how do native-speakers react when a non-native speaker plays with the language of their speech community and by extension aspects of their culture?

Some of my informants report that they have experimented with creative wordplay with idioms but suffered pragmatic failure, confirming Prabhu's assertion of unequal treatment of native and non-native speaker creativity by the native speech community. The following description is an eloquent statement of the problem:

> A few weeks ago, I sent an e-mail to a long-lost [native-speaker] friend who humorously replied 'your name does indeed ring a bell.' I replied that I was glad I could still ring bells in his quarters and when I saw him the following week he said he was surprised I didn't know the meaning of 'ring a bell.' I may be over-generalising a bit, but it seems to me that nonnative speakers, even if they have reached a very advanced level, are still considered incapable of playing with the language; if they attempt to do so, they will be regarded with suspicion and, consequently, they will fail to communicate their meaning. Native speakers on the other hand appear to be considered by definition incapable of making mistakes – therefore, creative deviations on their part will usually be commented on favourably and their humour will be appreciated much more easily.
>
> – Greek non-native speaker (author's data)

Communication is a two-way process. In the following extract, a native-speaker interlocutor explains why idiomatic pragmatic failure may occur when non-native speakers use idioms, whether creatively or in their canonical form:

> One thing is that idioms are very sensitive to mistakes. If I ask a non-native speaker for directions and he says 'Take the second left-handed street', I notice the mistake, understand the message and think no more about it. If, on the other hand, he says, 'I have never been able to dance. I have two left-handed feet', the mistake is ridiculous and would probably prompt laughter in a native speaker – not at the speaker's making a mistake, but at the sudden foregrounding and highlighting of what should be transparent.
>
> – Native-speaker (author's data)

Conclusion: The outer circles strike back

As for the thorny question of which model of English is appropriate for us to teach in the context of the varied uses to which English is

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put as the world's lingua franca, the following quotation confronts us with a dilemma:

> The form of English taught in an EFL country should be determined only by the degree in which it will enable non-native speakers to cope with the linguistic aspects of internationalism as it affects their own lives.… This form should be 'Standard English' in its two major regional forms. — Bent Preisler (1999)

One can agree with the first part of this assertion, but the second part one needs to relate to the idiomatic nature of much of Standard English, in both its written and spoken media. If phraseology is a large part of Standard English, do we include all kinds of idiomatic phraseology in the models we base our teaching on? More research needs to be carried out into the concept of 'unilateral idiomaticity' and the extent to which it exacerbates mutual intelligibility in contexts where English is a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2001a).

At the same time, given that phraseology of some kind or another does play a part in the rich tapestry that is English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), we need to know more about which idiomatic expressions and collocations travel lightly from culture to culture, from context to context in the diverse global uses of modern English. Apart from a phonological (Jenkins, 2000) and grammatical and lexical 'common core' for ELF (Seidlhofer, 2001a, 2001b, 2000c), we need to define an 'idiomatic common core' both for receptive and productive purposes.

Native-speakers are one strand of ELF and need to be understood and to make themselves understood. This may involve adjusting the degree of idiomaticity they introduce into their contacts with speakers from the periphery or other centres of English use. Fluent non-native speakers also have a degree of phraseology which facilitates successful interpersonal interaction. This too is a strand of ELF which needs to be taken into account in drawing up syllabuses, in writing textbooks, and in the language-awareness components of teaching and teacher training courses. Phraseology, mostly of the more transparent, collocational variety, is moreover an integral part of language examinations, especially at the higher levels. Indeed, exams, on the principle of backwash, are often the engine that drives forward what happens in classrooms (Wall, 2000).

Teachers sometimes say that, although idioms are difficult to acquire, they are fun to learn. It may be that according to students' needs and wants we include idioms as part of our receptive syllabus (McCarthy, 1998:145) and as part of a strategy for satisfying the need for 'language play' that all language users seem to share (Cook, 2000).

Rather than limit our syllabuses to rigid 'models' (and thereby fall into the same trap as when imposing a homogeneous native-speaker model) we let a hundred flowers bloom: we encourage variety of idiom in the full sense if the word and revel in the sheer diversity of languages and cultures in contact (Bakhtin, 1981). Our target successful learner then becomes someone with linguistic and intercultural competence, someone able to code-switch when encountering other users of ELF from diverse cultural backgrounds: cf. Kramsch (1998), Modiano (1999), Alptekin (2002).

Seen in this light, we may conclude that there is good reason why successful non-native speakers 'deviate' from 'standard' idiomatic phraseology. It may be the case that the 'deviations' non-native speakers produce, especially in their attempts to be idiomatic, are not deviations at all but attempts at expressing meanings that are crucial for their cultural identities and are thus legitimate – even, on occasion, creative – 're-patternings' of the standard, native-driven language.

Note

In referring to the creative bending of the rules of idiomaticity and the non-native speaker, I am not referring to Joseph Conrad-type creativity, Booker prize-winners like Salman Rushdie, or Nobel prize-winners like V.S. Naipaul. I am referring to creativity with a small 'c' in the context of English as a Foreign Language or English as a Lingua Franca. English as a Second Language and nativized varieties of English are a different… uh, kettle of fish.

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