A Theoretical Analysis of Using Non-Literal Idiomatic Expressions in Communication

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Abstract

The current paper is an attempt to verify and demonstrate the significance of the use of non-literal idiomatic expressions in communication within a theoretical framework. Being an essential part of the use of language, the paper shows that the use of such idiomatic expressions is vital in various communicative situations due to a lot of reasons. This is achieved throughout the paper by mainly focusing on the linguistic level through which the idiomatic expressions of non-literal use are realized. Then, it shows the various possible meanings, ideas and messages which they may convey through the various linguistic forms in which they are reflected (such as phrases, fixed idioms, proverbs and so on). Finally, the paper sheds light on the significance of the use of those expressions in communication throughout demonstrating the fact that they are actually used in daily life communication and the major role they play in influencing the entire communication event.

Key words: idiomatic expressions, non-literal, use, communication, influence

پوخته

ئەم تویژینەوەیە هەوڵێکە بۆ سەلماندن و نیشاندانی گرنگی بەکارهێنانی زاراوە ناحەرفیەکان لە پەیوەندیەکان لە چوارچێوەیەکی تیۆری. ئەم تویژینەوەیە ئەوە نیشان دەدات کە بەکارهێنانی زاراوە ئیدیەماتیکیەکان لە چەند شوێنی جیاوازی پەیوەندیەکان، لەبەر چەند هۆکارێکی جیاواز. بۆئەم مەبەستە لە ڕێگەی ئەم تویژینەوەیە بەشێوەیەکی سەرەکی هەوڵ دەدرێت جەخت لە ئاستی زمانەوانی بکرێتەوە لە بەکارهێنانی ئەم زاراوانە بە شێوەیەکی ناحەرفی. لە دوایدا ئەم تویژینەوەیە مانا و بیرۆکە و پەیامە جیاوازیەکان نیشان دەدات کە لە شێوەی زاراوەی زمانەوانی وەکو فڕێز و ئیدیەمە نەگۆڕەکان و پەندەکان ڕەنگی داوەتەوە. لە کۆتایدا ئەم تویژینەوەیە جەخت لە گرنگی بەکارهێنانی ئەم زاراوانە دەکاتەوە کە لە پەیوەندیەکان دەردەبردرێن لە ڕێگەی نیشاندانی ڕاست و دروستی بەکارهێنانیان لە پەیوەندی ڕۆژانه و گێڕانی ڕۆڵی سەرەکی کاریگەر لە هەموو پەیوەندیەکان.

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الملخص

يُعد البحث الحالي محاولة للتحقق و لأثبات مغزى استخدام التعابير الاصطلاحية ذات الدلالات الغير حرفية

باطار نظري. ولأن استخدام هذه التعابير في اللغة و التواصل هو جزء اساسي فان البحث يبين أن استخدامها حيوي في مختلف مواقف الاتصال للعديد من الاسباب. ويتحقق ذلك من خلال التركيز على المستوى و التحليل اللغوي الخاص بهذه المصطلحات. و بعد ذلك يبين المعاني المحتملة العديدة و الافكار و الرسائل التي من الممكن أن تنقلها التعابيرالصطلاحية الغير حرفية من خلال الاشكل اللغوية المتعددة التي تتخذها (مثل العبارات و المصطلحات الثابتة و الامثلة و غير ذلك). واخيرا فان البحث يسلط الضوء على مغزى استخدام هذه التعابير في التواصل من خلال اثبات حقيقة أنها تُستخدم في مواقف الحياة اليومية و كذلك أثبات دورها الرئيسي في التأثير على مُجمل عملية التواصل.

1. Introduction

Language is doubtlessly the most significant, influential and vivid system of communication used by speakers in various communicative events and situations to achieve different purposes. But what is really interesting about the use of language is the use of idiomatic expressions which can serve numerous communicative functions in a more interesting, enjoyable and influential way. The paper is an attempt to illustrate this interesting way of the use of language, specifically, through the use of what can be termed idioms of non-literal use in communication. While the literal meaning is the straight orientation of words or sentences to objects, or, in other words, what they refer to, the non-literal idiomatic expressions are used for giving a creative description, reflecting prominent experience or even demonstrating ironical or metaphorical senses to achieve a special influence or to accomplish a certain purpose. For instance, when someone, says " the exam was easy" it is entirely clear from the literal meaning that the exam was not difficult or the questions were easy but when someone says "the exam was a piece of cake", there is definitely a non-literal use reflected by the use of words such as "cake" conveying the idea that the exam was easy. Such use of language is indeed a characteristic of everyday communication but it is absolutely difficult to understand it unless there is a good knowledge of both the linguistic strategies and the intended meanings or messages which such expressions may convey. The paper focuses on clarifying the various linguistic structures which those idiomatic expressions may have and on the various meanings, ideas and messages which they may convey when used in a communicative event. Nevertheless, it is to a great extent a requirement to illustrate the significance behind their use and what possible influence they may have in a specific communicative situation.

2. The Scope of Non-literal Idioms

The clarification or manifestation of what is literal and non-literal (represented by the use of idiomatic expressions) is not entirely recognizable or can be distinguished easily at the various levels of linguistic analysis including the syntactic, semantic or even the pragmatic levels. Ariel (2002) reveals that literal and non-literal meanings may overlap to a certain extent and, thus, the boundary between the two constitutes a fine thread. Literal meaning is explicit in this sense that it denotes the same idea or meaning continuously.

In fact, the, the scope of idiomatic expressions of non-literal use poses challenges in the applications of languages. They can be in conflict with selection limitations as in "push one's luck" where only

tangible materials are attached to the verb 'push' as its semantic inherent feature dominates the uses of such verbs. Idioms can violate prototypical subcategorization restrictions, or change the default assignments of semantic roles to syntactic categories. For instance, in "X breaks something with Y, Y typically is an instrument" but when applying such semantic manifestation to "break the hear"; the semantic role would be probably the role of a patient as in "He broke the heart of his mother" (Sporleder and Li, 2009). In addition, many inherent idioms are used denotatively or connotatively relying on their linguistic properties and on the communicative event (or any relevant context) in which they may be used. In general, when attempting at clarifying non-literal idiomatic expressions as used in various communicative event, it is possible to state the fact that idioms are "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components" (Baker,1992: 63). This could be clearly taken to mean that such expressions should be interpreted in accordance to specific linguistic strategies not by an account of what the parts of the expression mean in isolation. Hence idioms of non-literal use can be defined as special groupings with constrained forms and meanings that cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of the words which make them up (Meryem, 2009). O'Dell & McCarthy (2010) state that an idiomatic expression, which is used non-literally, is a fixed syntactic structure, including various phrases, reflecting an idea that is entirely ambiguous to understand if the reliance is on what each part of that idiom means separately. Certainly, this is to achieve specific influence in certain communicative event. So, for example, if one says 'Having five kids under the age of five keeps Jane on her toes ', it will be difficult to understand the meaning of the sentence efficiently if the listener or hearer does not have an idea about the non-literal use of 'on someone's toes' which means 'to keep someone busy and cautious all the time '. This is because the expression carries a non-literal or idiomatic meaning, which is uneasy to figure out from the constituent words. Such clarifications of idioms encompass specific characteristics or features that they have due to their form and influence. O'Dell & McCarthy (2010) state that non- literal idioms are a reflection of a formulaic language and this is an important feature of idiomatic expressions of this kind.

In this respect, they describe such idioms as standard unchangeable expressions and consider such description as one of the most important intrinsic characteristics which non-literal expressions must have. Such description reflects the fact that idioms of this sort are entire entities and not separate parts which are grouped to convey a single idea. Idioms have a feature of being based upon everyday ideas and things, as for example: ' Me and my friend just don't see eye to eye' and are quite informal. In sum, they are, by natural syntactic and semantic observations, unchangeable (ibid). For example, one cannot say 'sound and safe' instead of the actual expression, which is 'safe and sound'. But, perhaps, the most important feature that they notably have is the fact that they contain figurative language in the sense that they are non-literally used to express various ideas and meanings for the purpose of achieving specific influence (Wright, 1999). This peculiarity is termed by many linguists and philosophers the opaqueness of idioms as one of the prominent features as Ayto (2009) lists in his preface. This feature is also referred to by some other linguists under the heading pure idioms as when Fernando (1996:35) defines pure idiom as a "type of conventionalized, non-literal multiword expression". He also associates the feature of being opaque; pure idioms are opaque in the sense that their parts cannot not be interpreted literally or in isolation from each other. For example, the pure idiom "to spill the beans" has nothing to do with the beans (ibid).

3. Linguistic Analysis of Non-Literal Idioms

This section is devoted to illustrate the linguistic properties of non-literal idiomatic expressions for a better understanding of how they are formed so as to relate them later on to their own significance when used in a specific communicative event. The focus will be on the structural (syntactic), semantic and pragmatic levels of analysis. It is worth noting that non-literal idiomatic expressions contain, mostly, a group of words which their meanings and structures are largely restricted but they function as one complete unite. As far as the semantic analysis is concerned, the lexical interpretation of the words which make up an idiom cannot be relied on to the intended meaning of the non-literal idiomatic expression as an entire unit (Crystal, 2008). Syntactically, the parts of the idioms, in this particular sense, do not mostly allow the usual changeability they demonstrate in other communicative events. For instance, "it is raining cats and dogs" does not allow "it is raining a cat and a dog" (ibid).

Fernando (1996) lists a group of syntactic structures including adjectival, verbal or nominal which clearly reflect the presence of such idiomatic expressions as in the following (only those which are opaque in meaning are considered):

- Noun+ Noun: There are a number of nouns in English which always collocate with each other arranged in a way that cannot be altered. But it might be a little bit difficult to justify which precedes which as with 'cats and dogs' in 'it was raining cats and dogs'.
- Noun preceded by an adjective: such idiomatic phrases provoke extra exertion in understanding them especially by non-natives or EFL learners because they exhibit distinguished meaning which is independent of context. English is full of phrases of the kind of 'dark horse', 'an early bird', 'French leave' and so on.

There are of course various other structures which the present paper is not really intended to cover and the above structures may well introduce the possibility of the used structures of non-literal idioms to a better understanding of how they are formed. As far as the semantic analysis of such idioms is concerned, it is possible to state the fact that such idiomatic expressions are totally characterized with the feature of "opacity". This is an essential and obligatory part that is required if the idiom is to be interpreted non-literally. This feature simply means that the meaning of such idioms is not the totality of its parts. Consequently, the parts (words or other structures) which make up the idiom do not convey any meaning of their own. Indeed, there is no connection whatsoever between the literal meanings of the individual words and the idiomatic meaning of the whole phrase (ibid). To illustrate this point thoroughly, due to its significance, it is possible to consider the idiomatic expression: "to bury the hatch" where it is entirely strange (or may even sound funny) to interpret it part by part. In other words, interpreting 'bury' alone and 'hatch' alone to give the meaning of this idiom will be a linguistic disaster as it will give the idea, according to the literal interpretation of each one, of putting in the ground a hatch (an opening through a wall or floor). But, together, this idiom is usually interpreted as to become friendly again after disagreement. What this illustration implies precisely is the fact that the semantic surface interpretations (if possible to be described so) have little or no role to arrive at the intended meaning or message of the whole expression. So the meaning of "bury" and "hatch" are totally different when they are used together as an entire expression (Bell, 1991).

4. The Use of Non-Literal Idioms

Language is used when people talk or write so as to mainly communicate to achieve various purposes. One of the significant purposes is the fact that people want others to understand, think, do something or even influence others so as to convince, attract or fulfill what they desire in a way or another. The means of achieving this is certainly the use of language which may contain various expressions including idioms, metaphors, proverbs or even some verses just like using different colors to make a book more interesting. With regard to the use of non-literal idioms, it is possible to say that they are actually used by people in various communicative events due to a number of reasons. One of the reasons might be the intention to influence others particularly when a speaker (or even a writer) may feel the need to use such idioms or simply because it is part of the cultural consciousness of the speakers. But what really matters is the influence or significance which such idioms have when used in specific communicative event. In all cases, the communicative event may require more than the use of direct illustration so as, as mentioned previously, to influence others as when one may say "you have to hold your horses" where it is associated with a pragmatic function as Newmark (1988) states that idioms of non-literal sense have mostly pragmatic function. With this idiom, the influence intended is to make the listener "thinks carefully" where this idiom is used to advice someone not to be hesitant in taking vital decision. Moreover, such functions may vary, in accordance with the used idiom so as to excite, to amaze, to enjoy, i.e. it may convey various speech acts like warning, confessions, instructions, offer, threats, etc. In this case, it might be better to a certain extent to use the non-literal idioms rather than addressing an issue with the use of literal direct language (ibid). Fromkin et al. (2003: 3205) states that "knowing a language includes knowing the morphemes, simple words, compound words, and their meaning." This necessitates, among other required linguistic knowledge, the need to get an acquaintance with special kinds of structures which are made up of more than single words and which their meanings cannot be considered from the meanings of the separate words which make such structures (idiomatic expressions). To use a language efficiently, speakers of the target language should get acquaintance with the various idiomatic expressions so as to understand better and to communicate even much better. In fact, when it comes to English (being the target language) one must consider the significance of the use of such expressions that are used in the English language.

As such, being not familiar with idiomatic expressions is definitely deemed as a negative indicator of aptitude for the foreign language learners or nonnative speakers if they are unaware of the use of idiomatic expressions while communicating whether in ordinary speech or during academic speaking or writing. Idioms comprise all parts of life where they can refer to medical issues, or they may be reflected in the use of colors idioms, such as 'a black look' or 'be in the black'. To increase those parts of life that such idioms may cover, it is possible to add one of the most interesting and the most influential part in any communicative event which is the use of food idioms like 'piece of cake', 'cool as cucumber', 'bread and butter' and so on. Similarly, there are idioms reflecting various fields of activities like those used in science, management, accounting, politics, animal idioms and the most widely used body idioms, such as 'armed to teeth' meaning 'heavily armed with deadly weapons'. (Maftonn and Mazloomi, 2009). It may be assumed (theoretically) that various communicative events do contain non-literal idioms not occasionally but continuously and perhaps every daily talk must contain in a way or another an idiomatic expression being part of the customary use of that language

on the on hand and being an efficient tool that speakers may use to make an influence deep in the mind of the listeners or addresses for a number of attributes. They are an important part of the native speaker's language and considered to be equally common knowledge among English native speakers. In this respect, although the current paper is theoretical, it is very important to clarify the importance of the use of such idioms with regard to nonnative speakers. Since they are part of language and used on daily basis expressing meanings in anon-literal way, it is indeed of great significance, based on the use, for the non-native speakers of English to be acquainted with the role of the idiomatic expressions in language because it is a vital part of being efficient when it comes to the performance of the English language. Their exploitation in language is assumed to widen peoples' knowledge and thoughtfulness in all the linguistic aspects. Idiomatic use is believed to augment peoples' manipulation of language when they talk about different topics and in particular when they want to be more influential. As a result, idiomatic use must be a part of the second-language learners (L2) vocabulary. Students of English who effectively communicate using idiomatic expressions show a better understanding of English and they have an ability to "communicate on a deeper level of the language'(Ambrose, 2008). Of course, this is related to a complete exposure of to the use of the idioms in actual communicative events.

For instance, when someone says "She was burning the midnight oil because she hadn't been taking her school work seriously", it could be explained as staying up late at night studying or working. This does not mean that the use of such idiom is to be directly and smoothly interpreted by speakers as it sometimes may sound not really clear. Nevertheless, speakers may rely on contextual clues as long as it is within the average of the native speakers' vocabulary. This could be applied to non-native speakers where they can get more access to such idioms if they are in continuous exposure to the use of the target language and gradually they would encounter a large number of idioms (ibid). Indeed, many language experts and philosophers recognize that information about such idioms, that is, the aptitude to comprehend and perform them properly and sufficiently, is tremendously vital and deemed to be as a pointer of L2 eloquence and a sign of the presence of a proficient communicative capability. The ability to produce and comprehend idioms is termed as "figurative competence". Figurative competence, which is a synonym to the non- literal use of language, or the sufficient knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in a second/foreign language, requires certain skills and includes the ability to produce and use idioms when attempting at communicating, whether spoken or written. Thus adequate idiom knowledge leads to better L2 fluency making second/foreign language learners more L2 proficient. (Andreou and Galantomos, 2009). This might, in turn, highlights the significance of the use of idiomatic expressions of non-literal use by presuming that when nonnatives and natives communicate using such idioms, language would be more effective, enjoyable and interesting. On the other hand, the nonnatives would approach professionally and efficiently various communicative situations to the extent that their language would process native augmentation when comprehending the precise meanings, ideas or messages of those idioms and trying at the same time to respond. In other words, the mutual efficient comprehension would lead to a better use of language and to a better level of utilizing language for achieving various purposes. Though it is entirely theoretical, it is perhaps very useful to think of possible communicative situations in which various idiomatic expressions might be used so as to validate their significance in a relevant situation. When, for

example, X says "M is really the *big cheese* of the company"*, X is attempting to draw the attention to the fact that M is an

*Idiomatic expressions, in Italics, along with their counterparts' meanings are adapted and modified from Oxford Dictionary of Idioms 2004.

important person and perhaps the most influential (where this idiomatic expression means so). In a relevant communicative situation, this idiomatic expression, "the big cheese", would influence the communicative situation in two major presumable ways: the first is the force and linguistic attraction of The use of the idiomatic expression itself where all parts of the sentence sound natural expect for the "big cheese" and this is itself an awareness of the central idea behind using it. The second is the precise or intended meaning where the focus would be apparently not on the company or M but rather what M can do or the authorities or powers he/she may have. The latter force might lead to a more detailed discussion, views or even specific reactions concerning the "the big chees itself". In other words, being non-literal, an idiom would gain an influential power on the entire situation where it is considered the center around which the talk or discussion may revolve. As mentioned earlier, the use of those idioms would serve many purposes which vary in accordance with the communicative situation itself and this strongly implies that the purposes of the use of those idioms are to a large extent pragmatic. In this respect, the idioms are set within the boundaries of pragmatics as they may trigger the function of multiple speech acts as warning, advice, threat and so on. This connection is entirely obvious when it is possible, as emphasized throughout many parts of the paper, to consider idioms used by speakers significant in any communicative event since they are used non-literally and, consequently, their significance would be beyond dispute a reflection of the user's choice, strategy or attitude to convey a message or an idea of various purposes. As such, idioms would serve the carriers of various speech act as when a speaker may say, in a possible presumable situation, "you have to *hold your horses*" in a situation where someone is about to make a rash decision and in this case, the act of advice is achieved through the use of " hold your horse" which refers to the idea of thinking deeply or slowing down before taking a decision or a certain action. In fact, taking the view of idioms with pragmatic indication has largely been an attraction in the analysis of idiomatic expressions and in particular in various social situations in which idiomatic expressions are likely to be used leading . Pragmatic idioms (also referred to as routines social formulas or gambits)can be defined as "specific items and expressions which are largely controlled by a particular social situation" (S.Gramley and K.M. Patzold, 1992: 92). Such pragmatic functions reflected by the use of non-literal idiomatic expressions would certainly cover various intended speech acts as they have an inherent feature of conveying.

an idea or message indirectly since they are used non-literally. Yet, it is to be emphasized at this point that the use of such idioms is a matter of choice; speakers due to certain linguistic and other nonlinguistic attributes may choose to intrude the non-literal use of language. When attempting, for instance, to capture a situation of "*a fish out of water*" said by someone in a relevant communicative situation, one might immediately deduce the existence of undesired situation or environment where the interpretation of this idiom suggests so. The communication itself would be converted into a more rising up consideration and profoundness leading the participants into using language in a completely precise, elaborative and expressive direction. Though, as mentioned repeatedly, the verification of

the current work is set to achieve a theoretical generalization about the use of such idioms, it might be possible, and to some extent better, to clarify some points concerning the significance of the use of such idioms by nonnatives especially when approaching the level of proficiency of English language. The point to make is that presumably all nonnatives or EFL learners would communicate in the target or try to do so being part of their aim and this communication varies in accordance with the communicative situation or the academic one. In all cases, they might increase the level of language proficiency just when they are exposed to native language use part of which is mastering the use of non-literal idiomatic expressions through various ways. Understanding what a certain idiomatic expression means and the capability to respond properly is a feature of the proficiency of language use. This of course will lead the nonnatives or other learners to know more about the non-literal use of language and the more they comprehend more idioms the more their vocabulary and performance of language become proficient, professional and native-like.

Conclusion

Just as there is a great difference in watching TV in black and white and watching it with colours, the use of non-literal idiomatic expressions makes communication entirely colourful, elaborative and enjoyable. In fact, such idioms play a significant role in enriching any communicative event. They inherently express various ranges of ideas and convey multiple messages in a more interesting way by imposing the fact that their parts or constituents are treated as a single unit as far as their intended or proper interpretations are concerned. Thus, when used in a certain communicative event, they influence the listeners or addresses and the level of influence reach various parts and may arouse directly their thinking, estimation and entire evaluation when trying to understand what such idioms mean and why they are used. The force of the use of non-literal idiomatic expressions is reflected by their powerful linguistic images drawing the attention to an idea in an amazing, colourful and interesting way. They have various pragmatic functions but in a more powerful way than is usually expressed by other linguistic strategies and means. Apart from their significance in communication, they are considered an essential and an influential strategy of gaining proficiency of the target language since a lot of new information and vocabulary are mastered along with their meanings. Their use increases the vocabulary in a more interesting way leading to a better and more efficient performance of the language. In sum, they are the rainbow that all are attracted to whenever there is a rainbow.

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