

A STUDY ON ENGLISH IDIOMS

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This book is dedicated to our families, to whom we are indebted for their love, support and patience.

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FOREWORD

A Study on English Idioms is an invitation to savoring English and American idioms presented in various contexts. We are certain that motivated learners can look forward to adding more English idioms to their ever-expanding vocabulary.

Learning idioms can be “a piece of cake” or, sometimes, “impossible to make heads or tails out of”. Teaching and learning idioms can be fun and can make non-natives sound more like native speakers. Through idioms, non-natives can become more in tune with colloquial English.

Some English expressions are unusual and impossible to guess where they originate from unless we know their history. For example, the Bible, Aviation, the Navy, the Army, history, farming and animals, parts of the body, and sports and games all present a historical basis for English expressions.

Therefore, this book is addressed to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students of different levels. It is meant to support them in the communication process, and to aid language specialists and teachers. This book was designed as a tool for linguistic study and as a handbook for teachers and students.

Divided into four main sections, i.e. theoretical background, exercises, answers to exercises and glossary, this book is aimed at familiarizing the reader with the intricate issues and meanings of English and American idioms, providing, at the same time, a better understanding of the cultural particularities embedded into the English language.

The theoretical background provides several definitions of English idioms, discusses and illustrates their classification criteria and points out particularities within the background of a constantly developing vocabulary. This section also deals with the importance and difficulties of teaching and learning idioms. In the broader context of EFL teaching and of the complex nature of vocabulary in general, this section focuses on several effective teaching strategies and activities.

The exercises found in this book will help learners fix and deepen their acquired knowledge about the most commonly used English and American idiomatic expressions and their meanings. The answers to exercises will offer the possibility of self-assessment. The Glossary consists of a selection of the most common idioms of the English language, representing a useful source of information and supporting the learners in solving the exercises from the previous section.

Within this book, many different needs and interests are catered to. The book consists of vocabulary and grammar in context, as well as authentic material, and facilitates the acquisition of English as a foreign language. It can be used as a teaching and learning tool in formal and informal settings and has been conceived as an eye-opener for all those who enjoy learning English and are eager to brush up on their idioms.

The authors

I. ENGLISH IDIOMS: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Definitions of idioms

The English vocabulary is constantly enriching with borrowings, neologisms or idiomatic expressions. Idioms play an important part in any language. They are some of the pieces that build distinctive features which make the difference among languages. More than that, idioms reflect certain cultural traditions, such as religious beliefs, culture-specific terms, superstitions, and depict the national character.

Since idioms are frequently used both in oral and in written discourse, they have attracted the attention of many linguists, who have tried to define and categorize them. In his study, *Teaching Idioms*, Cooper (1998, p. 256) defines idioms as “figurative expressions that do not mean what they literally state”. Moreover, from this linguist’s perspective, idioms are similar to metaphors – “a nonliteral usage of words in which one element, the topic, is compared to another, the vehicle, based on one or more features” (Nippold and Fey, 1983 cited by Cooper, 1998, p. 255). In addition, the same above-mentioned linguist compares idioms with similes (comparisons that are specifically asserted by the use of *like* or *as*) and proverbs (which use words figuratively, with less evident meanings than in metaphors and similes).

In its turn, the *Webster’s Dictionary online* defines the term *idiom* as “an expression whose meaning cannot be predicted from the usual meanings of its constituent elements”, while the *Oxford Dictionary online* describes it as “a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words (e.g. *over the moon*, *see the light*)”, originating from the late 16th century, “from French *idiome*, or via late Latin from Greek *idiōma* ‘private property, peculiar phraseology’, from *idiousthai* ‘make one’s own’, from *idios* ‘own, private’ ”. In its turn, the *Cambridge Dictionary online* defines it as “a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own”.

Moon (1998, p. 3) defines the term idiom as “an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways”. Thus, from the above-mentioned linguist’s perspective, in general, idioms have two main meanings. Firstly, they are used in order to particularly denote “something in language, music or art which characterizes a person or a group”, and secondly, it is “a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language”.

Usually, idioms have a fixed form and therefore, in order to better understand them, they should be set in a context. For example, *drive somebody round the bend* means *make somebody angry or frustrate*. If we look at the words individually, we cannot know the meaning of this idiom, as this category is noncomposite (i.e. the meaning of an idiom does not result from the joined meaning of the words that make up the respective idiom). This reflects the definition given by McMordie and Seidl (1988, p. 13), professing that an idiom is “a number of words which, when taken together, have a different meaning from the individual meanings of each word”. Since the meaning of idioms cannot be derived from the sum of the meanings of the component words, idioms do not always follow grammatical rules, but can have certain characteristics. In this regard, Chafe (1968, cited in Lennon, 1998) stated that the meaning of an idiom is comparable to the meaning of a single lexical item; in addition, the idiom may admit of a literal meaning, but the idiomatic meaning will be primary and occur more frequently. He also noticed that most idioms exhibit certain transformational deficiencies and that a minority of idioms may be grammatically deviant.

As pointed out above, many researchers have tried to define an idiom, but giving the fact that there are many available interpretations suggests that they have not agreed on a single explanation. Simpson and Mendis (2003, p. 423) define idioms as “a group of words that occur in a more or less fixed phrase whose overall meaning cannot be predicted by analyzing the meaning of its constituent parts.” They also mention the fact that “the word idiom conjures up language that is taught to be entertaining, engaging, casual, charming, colorful and memorable” (p. 419).

An *idiom* represents “an expression whose meaning cannot be derived from its constituent parts” (Stein and Su, 1980, p. 444). *The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms VI* defines idioms as “a fixed group of words with special meaning different from the meaning of the separate words”.

An idiom or a phrase is commonly used within a given culture and this makes Glucksberg (2001, p. 68) state that “what sets idioms apart from most other fixed expressions is their ‘non-logical’ nature, that is, the absence of

any discernable relation between their linguistic meanings and their idiomatic meanings”.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*,

“idioms are specific to one culture and language and their meaning is peculiar to that language, otherwise, idioms are defined as proper language of a people or country, dialect; specific character of a language; expression peculiar to a language”.

Therefore, idioms cannot be translated literally from the source language into the target language because they would lose their real meaning; one solution would be to find an equivalent in the target language or to create a context that renders a similar meaning.

In his turn, Stathi (2006, p. 27) explains that the word *idiom* usually refers to two categories of fixed expressions. Thus, on the one hand, idioms are “expressions whose idiomaticity is semantic; typical expressions are: *kick the bucket, spill the beans, etc.*”. On the other hand, “idiomaticity is a formal property of expressions and is more or less equated with the fixedness of form: *by and large*”.

1.2. Classification of Idioms

Linguists McCarthy and O’Dell (2002) categorized idioms in terms of their connections with different **topics, such as animals, sports, body parts, food and drink, colors, names of people and places, senses**. The above-mentioned scholars concluded that idioms are pervasive, being used in formal and informal contexts, in conversation and writing; moreover, they are employed in standard speech, in business, education and the media.

Jane Applebee and Anton Rush, in their book, *Help with Idioms* (1992), classify idioms into seven groups/sections, as follows:

1. **Historical idioms** – used a long time ago to describe familiar events or situations. Even though their meanings have changed, they are still used:

- *bark up the wrong tree* = be mistaken/direct one’s attention towards the wrong thing or person;

- *be on cloud nine* = be very happy / elated;

- *be up to scratch* = be of an acceptable/desired standard;

- *blue stocking* = a woman who is very intellectual or academic.

2. **New idioms** – they have entered the language along with many inventions and have been spread through the media:

- *couch potato* = someone who is very inactive;
- *culture shock* = feeling uncomfortable in a strange country or place because of the different habits and way of life;
- *golden parachute* = a contract which is given to important executives so that they receive a large sum of money if they lose their job;
- *nightmare scenario* = the most awful series of events that can be imagined.

3. **Humorous idioms** – look and sound ridiculous:

- *fuddy-duddy* = someone or something which is very old-fashioned/conservative/boring;
- *hotchpotch* = a mixture of different things or ideas which do not go together;
- *slapdash* = inefficient/ of a low standard.

4. **Foreign idioms** – borrowed from different other languages:

- *carte blanche* = freedom to decide everything/anything;
- *faux pas* = embarrassing social mistake;
- *pièce de resistance* = the best one of several similar things which someone has created;
- *tête-à-tête* = a private/intimate conversation between just two people.

5. **Slang** – it is most popular in spoken English and it is not considered proper English:

- *sparetyre* = excess fat around the waist;
- *burn oneself out* = use up all one's energy over a long period;
- *five o'clock shadow* = the beard which grows in a day after a man shaves in the morning;
- *kick the bucket* = die.

6. **Proverbs** – they are wise sayings which have been passed from generation to generation:

- *easy come, easy go* = anything which is acquired with little effort can be easily and quickly lost;

- *the last straw* = a final problem or setback which makes a situation completely unbearable;
- *let sleeping dogs lie* = do not interfere with or change something which may cause problems if it is disturbed or alerted;
- *there is no smoke without fire* = there is always some truth in a rumor.

7. **Similes and Metaphors** – they give information about behavior, reactions or opinions without long explanations:

- *get on like a house on fire* = enjoy the company of someone very much;
- *in a nutshell* = essentially/very concisely;
- *like a red rug to a bull* = infuriating/causing great anger;
- *storm in a teacup* = a small problem which is exaggerated.

In their book, *English Idiom: A Fifth Edition of English Idioms and How to Use Them* (1988), McMordie and Seidl classify idioms into:

1. Idioms with nouns and adjectives

- *one's cup of tea* = something/someone that interests one or not;
- *a breath of fresh air* = a thing or a person that brings a refreshing and welcome change;
- *child's play* = a very easy task;
- *a drop in the ocean* = a very small amount.

2. Idiomatic pairs (of adjectives, nouns, adverbs, verbs, identical pairs)

- *all in all* = considering everything;
- *little by little* = gradually, at a slow rate;
- *sick and tired* = thoroughly bored or annoyed with somebody/something;
- *body and soul* = physical and mental energy.

3. Idioms with prepositions (above, across, on, off, out, etc.)

- *above suspicion* = too honest to be suspected of doing something wrong;
- *across the board* = affecting everyone without exception;
- *off the air* = not broadcasting or being broadcast;
- *out in the cold* = not be included or informed; be left out, ignored or neglected.

4. Phrasal verbs

- *be after something* = aim at getting something, want something;
- *bear with someone* = be patient / tolerant with someone;
- *carry on* = continue;
- *come around/to* = regain consciousness.

5. Verbal idioms

- *come clean* = admit the truth, confess one's guilt;
- *do one's bit* = take one's share of responsibility, work, costs, etc.;
- *follow suit* = do the same as someone else has just done;
- *get the message* = understand or realize what someone wants one to understand or realize.

6. Idioms from special subjects (happiness, health, travel, etc.)

- *have itchy feet* = want to travel or move on;
- *jump for joy* = be very happy and excited about something good that has happened;
- *set off on a journey* = go somewhere;
- *clock on* = register at work.

7. Idioms with key words from special categories (animals, colors, parts of the body, etc.)

- *a rare bird* = someone or something of a kind that one seldom sees
- *crocodile tears* = insincere tears for effect only
- *in black and white* = in writing or in print
- *white coffee* = coffee with milk or cream

8. Idioms with comparisons:

- *as fresh as a daisy* = lively, wide awake and alert
- *as true as steel* = totally loyal, reliable and dependable
- *like a cat on hot bricks* = restless and nervous
- *sleep like a log* = sleep very deeply and soundly

According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2008), idioms are associated with topics such as animals, sports, the sea, body parts, food and drink, colors, senses, names, places, etc. Furthermore, idioms are used in order to depict physical appearance, character and personality, work and success, health and illness.

Idioms originated from different sources, as follows:

a) the Bible

At the eleventh hour - do something at the eleventh hour, and you do it at the very last minute (the Parable of the Labourers in the Gospel of St. Matthew (20, pp. 1-16), which metaphorically advises that no matter what time you start work the reward will always be the same);

By the skin of your teeth – to escape only by the narrowest of margins (the Old Testament Book of Job records how Job is put through a series of trials, but eventually escapes “with the skin of my teeth” (19: 20));

To cast pearls before swine - to offer something of value to someone unable to appreciate it (from the New Testament: “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet” (Matthew, 7: 6).

b) Shakespeare’s works

A charmed life – a life that seems to have been protected by a charm, magic or spell;

All that glitters is not gold – not everything that is shiny and superficially attractive is valuable;

As dead as a doornail – dead beyond any doubt;

Good riddance – to be happy when someone or something is gone;

Green-eyed monster – jealousy;

Lie low – to hide so you will not be caught by someone;

Mum’s the word – keep this a secret; don’t tell anybody;

Night owl – a person who stays up and is active late into the night;

Send him packing – to tell someone to go away, usually because you are annoyed with them.

c) Literature

Pot calling the kettle black – one should not accuse or criticize another person of something s/he is also guilty of (this idiom is derived from Cervantes’s novel, *Don Quixote*; it refers to the idea that at that time pots and kettles were made of cast iron and were blackened in the fire);

Love is blind – true love is not superficial, but love can be unexpected or random (first seen in writing in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* – “For love is blind all day, and may not see”);

Extend an olive branch – to offer peace or a truce after a disagreement (this idiomatic expression comes from the Greek myth of Athena who offered the olive tree to the Athenians and the Biblical story of Noah, when a dove came back with an olive branch to show that the great flood waters had receded, and Noah and his family could safely leave the ark);

Mad as a hatter – makes reference to the use of mercury to set felt hats; this was thought to drive hat makers crazy (although the expression had appeared before Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, this author created his Mad Hatter character in connection with this English idiom).

d) Aviation

Flying by the seat of your pants – to do something without planning, to figure things out as you go (being the largest point of contact between pilot and plane, most of the feel or feedback comes through the seat of the pants);

Pushing the envelope – to approach or exceed known performance boundaries (the envelope refers to a plane’s performance capabilities);

Wing and a prayer – hopeful but unlikely to succeed (a “wing and a prayer” was first uttered when an American flyer came back with a badly damaged wing).

e) The Navy

Above board – legal, out in the open (early trading ships would hide illegal cargo below the ship’s deck);

Passed with flying colors – to exceed expectations (sailing ships when passing by other ships at sea would fly their colors or flags);

Under the weather – to be ill (sick passengers go below deck, which provides shelter from the weather; on a ship the greatest swaying action is on deck).

f) The Army

Absent without Leave (AWOL) – not present without permission;

Join the colors – enlist in the army (each regiment in the British Army has a flag, called its “color”);

Loose lips sink ships – unguarded talk may give useful information to the enemy (this phrase was coined as a slogan during WWII as part of the US Office of War Information’s attempt to limit the possibility of people inadvertently giving useful information to enemy spies).

g) History

Ballpark estimate – it refers to an approximation rather than a definitive answer (the phrase refers to an outdated newspaper strategy used to gauge the number of attendants at a baseball game when nothing existed to measure it exactly);

Lunatic fringe – it makes reference to an extreme or eccentric minority within society or a group (during the Roman Empire, moon goddess *Luna* was thought to influence the people’s mental health with her moody personality features. Millennia later, President Teddy Roosevelt used this idiom in order to best depict his opinions regarding Anarchists on the outer edges of the political spectrum. Although still widely used in connection with one’s opinions on government systems, this idiom slowly expanded to also encompass other subjects);

Turn a blind eye – to pretend not to have noticed something (The famous English naval hero, Admiral Horatio Nelson, during the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801, is alleged to have deliberately raised his telescope to his blind eye, thus ensuring that he would not see any signal from his superior giving him discretion to withdraw from the battle).

h) Farming and animals

The black sheep of the family – refers to somebody who has done something bad, bringing embarrassment or shame to that person’s family;

Take the bull by the horns – doing something difficult in a courageous and purposeful way;

Don’t count your chickens – do not make plans that depend on something good happening before you knowing that it has actually happened.

i) Rural life

Strike while the iron is hot – take advantage of an opportunity as soon as it exists, in case the opportunity goes away and does not return;

Eat like a horse – to always eat a lot of food;
Put the cart before the horse – to do things in the wrong order.

j) Science and technology

Acid test – refers to a decisive test whose findings show the worth or quality of something;

Bright as a button – intelligent;

Hit/Press/Push the button – to panic suddenly;

It's not rocket science – it is not difficult to understand;

Reinvent the wheel – to waste one's time doing something that has already been done satisfactorily;

Run out of steam – if you *run out of steam*, you lose the energy, enthusiasm or interest to continue doing something;

Sputnik moment – refers to a moment of challenge when a society or person realizes they must work harder to surpass their competitors. The phrase was popularized by Barack Obama in his State of the Union address in 2011. The origin of the idiom comes from the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of the first Earth-orbiting satellite Sputnik 1, which was a great achievement at that moment;

Well-oiled machine – refers to something that operates well.

k) Parts of the body

at hand – nearby or close by in time or in space;

big mouth – said about someone who tends to say things which are meant to be kept secret;

cut one's throat – to bring about one's own ruin and downfall.

l) Feelings and emotions

Beside yourself – if you are *beside yourself* (with an emotion), you lose your self-control because of the intensity of the emotion you are feeling;

Make one's blood boil – If something makes your blood boil, it makes you really angry;

Make your ears burn – If something makes your ears burn, you are embarrassed by what you hear, especially if the conversation is about you.

m) Sports and games, gambling, hunting and guns

Dicey situation – risky, potentially dangerous;

Put my two cents in – to state one's opinion (when playing poker, you have to make a small bet before the cards are dealt);