

## *Some Notes on the Comprehension of English Idioms*

*Lecturer*  
*Dr. Sa'ad Salman Abdullah*  
*College of Arts*  
*University of Basrah*

### **Abstract**

Fixed expressions like idioms , are not usually taught , although they are essential for learning progress . This is because they are considered by many teachers of foreign languages to be the most difficult aspect of vocabulary not only for the learners to master but for the teachers of foreign language too .This is , to a large extent , true and so most teachers and foreign language learners encounter difficulties in decoding idioms . This paper explores the hypothesis that there may be a considerable degree of difficulty in comprehending and using idiomatic expressions which share their figurative meaning and the same underlying structure . Some informant testing was conducted to see whether native speakers of Arabic would be able to “ make sense “ of some idiomatic expressions . Equally , the test was in a form of exercise the purpose of which was to see whether teachers of English are able to decode the figurative meaning of idioms in a foreign language , thus contributing to the overall meaning of these expressions .

### **Methodology**

Informants were ( 16 ) university teachers of the Department of English and Translation at the College of Arts , Basrah University , all of whom volunteered to participate in the testing . It is important to bear in mind that some of those teachers teach linguistics , translation

while others teach literature ; in addition , the majority of them have been teaching in the Dept. of English for more than ( 15 ) years . So it was expected that their command of the English language would be to some extent , high . It was likely then , that the informants would be familiar with some commonly used idiomatic expressions which would make it easier for them to explain their meaning . It was not desirable that the informants automatically “ produce “ a ready made explanation of an idiom’s meaning and that is why , together with more familiar expressions , some less commonly used idiomatic expressions were chosen to make the decoding process slightly more difficult . A point worth mentioning here is that it may be much more difficult to decode an idiom which we have not seen before than an idiom we know and whose meaning we have retained and can automatically recall when using a particular idiom in discourse .

Informants were presented with a selection of ( 12 ) English idiomatic expressions . These idioms can be seen in Table ( 1 ) below .

**Table ( 1 )**  
**Idiomatic expressions used in informant testing**

No.	Idiomatic expressions
1	Spill the beans
2	To be head hunted
3	Look down on
4	Not to know whether one is standing on one’s head or on one’s heels
5	To be off one’s head
6	To wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve
7	Kick the bucket
8	To come to light
9	To send word
10	To have a heart to do something
11	To kill two birds with one stone
12	In cold blood

The informants were asked to explain in their own words the meaning of each expression , alternatively , to supply an equivalent

phrase of the idiom in English which would show that they had understood the meaning and know how to use it . Expressions (2), (5), and (6) , in particular, were considered to be less familiar to most teachers than the other expressions and that is why it was interesting to see whether the informants would be able to assign the correct meaning to them .

### **Results and Discussion :**

Most of the expressions listed yielded satisfactory results in the sense that the informants guessed the correct figurative meaning of the expressions . This may be due to the transparency of many of these idioms or also due to the fact that these informants were familiar with the commonly used ones . Also , informants may have encountered these idioms in context . However , the expressions “ **to be head hunted** “ , “**not to know whether one is standing on one’s head or on one’s heels** “ , and “ **to wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve** “ revealed some interesting information as to the figurative meanings assigned to them . These can be found in Tables ( 2 ) , ( 3 ) , and ( 4 ) .

**Table ( 2 )**  
**Meanings assigned to the idiom “ to be head hunted “**

Meanings Assigned	Number of Informants
To be appointed to a position	1
To make a lot of effort	1
To be obsessed with an idea	2
Wanted for murder	1
Obliged to leave work unwillingly	1
Came as a fancy	1
To be crazy about something	1
To be persuaded to do something	2
To be forced to do something	3
Unanswered	3

**Table ( 3 )**  
**Meanings assigned to the idiom “ not to know whether one is standing on one’s head or on one’s heels “**

Meanings Assigned	Number of Informants
Not to know what to do	1
Not have enough time	1
To feel unwell	4
To have a headache	3
Unanswered	7

**Table ( 4 )**  
**Meanings assigned to the idiom “ to wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve “**

Meanings Assigned	Number of Informants
To have courage to do something	1
Express feelings openly	1
Support	1
To be yourself	1
To impersonate	1
To be sensitively guided	2
To be open and honest	2
To avoid problems	1
Unanswered	6

As the meaning assigned by the informants to the idiom “ **to be head hunted** “ show , the word on which most informants seemed to have focused when decoding this idiom is the word “ **hunt** “ , as can be seen from the meanings “ **to be persuaded / forced to do something , it takes a lot of effort on the part of the other person to reach his or her goal** “. Sometimes , the one who is to be persuaded literally has to be “ **hunted** “ into a position to say yes to a proposal . Such an interpretation may support the hypothesis that “ **one part of an idiomatic expression does contribute to the overall figurative meaning** “ ( Everaet , 1995 : 66 ) . In this case , however ,

informants focused on the word “ **hunt** “ , a word which is more semantically “ **loaded** “ than “ **head** “ .

When we look more closely at the meaning which the informants assigned to the idiom “ **not to know whether one is standing on one’s head or on one’s heels** “ , it is again very interesting to find that the meaning “ **to be unwell** “ , “ **to have a headache** “ should be considered here . After all , when people feel physically unwell , the logical order of things is reversed as they are usually not able to concentrate on work properly , their eating habits may be disturbed , and they are mostly unable to follow their daily routine . However , there is a clear indication that this idiom might not be understood as straightforwardly as would be expected .

It is interesting here to raise the point , ( previously mentioned ) , that it may be much more difficult to decode an idiom which learners have not seen before an idiom they know and whose meaning they have retained and can automatically recall when using a particular idiom in discourse . For example , if we look at the idiom “ **to be head hunted** “ and the assigned meaning “ **to be obsessed with idea** “ , we can say that the informants might have thought of the head as the source by which one is constantly thinking about something and cannot get rid of thoughts which “ **hunt** “ or “ **haunt** “ him or her . So , the informants here were able to arrive at the meaning of this idiom with the help of an analogy . As Moon points out ( 1997 : 186-187 ) , when people encounter an unknown idiomatic expression , they use analogies , problem – solving strategies as well as their lexical knowledge in order to arrive at the meanings of such expressions . Such claim supports the hypothesis that “ **while decoding the meaning of unknown idiomatic expression , people unconsciously go back to the knowledge which they have about various conceptual domains and make use of it** ” ( *ibid* ) . This is evident when the informants did focus on the conceptual domains of “ **head** “ and “ **heart** “ to help them in the process of decoding .

This informant testing provided a proof that cognitive strategies are effective when people try to decode the figurative meaning of an idiom . It must borne in mind , however , that this “ decoding “ exercise cannot be deemed representative and no generalizations can be made since the testing involved only such a small number of

informants . Nevertheless , since some informants were unclear about the exact meaning of some idioms , the testing may also indicate that learners need an explanation of an idiom before they are able to use it . Most frequently , when idioms are placed in context , their meaning becomes clearer .

### **Some pedagogical Issues**

The cognitive analysis presented in this study could be useful in the teaching of idiomatic expressions to second language learners . It is suggested here that if learners of English were made aware of the cognitive structures which underlie idioms , they would be able to grasp the figurative meaning of idioms more easily and they would probably retain these lexical items in their memory for a long time . This claim goes against the assertion made by some scholars who suggest that the meaning of many idioms cannot be discovered and that it has to be learned only from a context which motivates their usage ( McGlone and Glucksberg , 1994 : 167 ) . However , context alone cannot facilitate learning and , what is more important , is to make learners retain idiomatic expressions reliably .

It is possible that some teaching strategies which rely on the metaphorical basis of many idioms would help learners with learning of idioms and would also make learning more enjoyable . Such teaching techniques could involve the making of idiomatic expressions part of short conversational exchanges which would convey contradicting conceptual metaphors and metonymies . This would induce learners to think about the conceptual message involved in such conversational exchanges ( Idem , 1988 : 669 ) . Another way as proposed by Boers (2000 , 566 ) , would be the collecting of idiomatic expressions relating to a particular conceptual domain by the teacher ( such as the human head , for example ) writing them up on the board and making the learners supply images which come to their mind when they see a particular idiom. In this way , conceptual metaphors and metonymies are bound to come up in the process of eliciting the learners' images ( ibid ) . Yet another technique could be the setting of idiomatic expressions in short pieces of text with relevant socio-cultural context . Learners could then guess the figurative meaning of such expressions on the basis of their individual experience . The last point brings up the question of etymology of

idioms . Historical origins of idiomatic expressions substantially contribute to the way in which idioms are conceptualized in the human mind , in general , provide a useful guide as to how people organize their concepts of the world around them ( Cacciari and Tabossi , 1993 : xii ) . Making learners aware of the etymological grounds of many idiomatic expressions is also constructive in that learners discover the historical experiences which people have carried with them in the course of history and which have been , to a certain degree , “ fossilized “ in idioms .

It is important to note , however , that not all figurative language can be dealt with in this way . Some idiomatic expressions are too opaque and it is difficult for both the teachers and learners to imagine them ( Boers , 2000 : 569 ) . But even if only a small proportion of idiomatic expressions could be made more accessible to learners ( such as the expressions discussed in this study ) , it would certainly be an achievement and a step forward in the teaching of metaphor in general .

Overall , it can be said that the teaching and learning of idiomatic expressions could be made more enjoyable if both teachers and learners focused on the conceptual framework which motivates the figurative meaning of many idioms and which makes idioms what they are : “ **expressions which maintain discourse relations by providing in a concise way an ocean of information a bout how people conceptualize the word around them** “ ( Cacciari and Glugsberg , 1990 : 16 ) .

### **Bibliography**

Boers , F., ( 2000 ) “ Metaphor Awareness and Vocabulary Retention “, Applied Linguistics , Vol.21( 4 ) , pp.553-571 .

Cacciari , C. and S. Glugsberg ( 1990 ) , “Understanding Idiomatic Expression : The Contribution of Word Meanings “, in G. B. Simpson ( ed . ) , Understanding Word and Sentence . Amsterdam , Elsevier .

Cacciari , C. and P. Tabossi (eds) (1993) Idioms : Processing , Structure And Interpretation . New Jersey : Lawrence

Erlbaum Associates Publishers .

Everaert , M. and E. J Vander Linden ( ed. ) ( 1995 ) . Idioms : Structural And psychological perspectives. New Jersey : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers .

Idem ., ( 1988 ) , “ The Comprehension of Idioms “ , Journal of Memory and Language , Vol . 27 , pp . 668 – 683 .

McGlone , M. S and S Glucksberg ( 1994 ) . “ Semantic Productivity and Idiom Comprehension “ , Discourse Processes , Vol 17 ( 2 ) , Pp . 167 – 190 .

Moon , R. , ( 1997 ) , “ Vocabulary Connections : Muli – Word Items in English “ , in N. Schmitt and M. J. McCarthy ( eds ) , Vocabulary : Description , Acquisition and Pedagogy . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press .