IDIOMS AND THE CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDING THAT (MAY) ARISE IN THE PROCESS OF ACQUISITION

Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska
Faculty of Education, Bitola, Macedonia
k_bisera@yahoo.com

Abstract

There are more than 6,000 living languages worldwide and varieties among languages that present a valuable point of interest for research (Kövecses, 2010). Differences and similarities between languages can help clarify the language - a universal tool that people use around the world. Every language is related to the culture of its speakers. This combination of language and culture raises several questions: Is culture embedded in the language, or is the language embedded in culture? Culture seems to affect language, but language is influenced by culture that exists in its own way. While language is taught, it is also important to understand its underlying culture in order to get an accurate and precise impression on people, without being biased or create an incorrect perception of their way of life. Recognizing the influence that culture has on language, people would be more motivated to study culture - especially as an addition to language studies.

Idioms are an important part of the language. They should be taught and translated appropriately, as they are part of the language widely accepted as standard English (Moreno, 2011). This research will help us see the importance of idioms from two aspects; how students who do not know enough of the target culture perceive the idioms and what professors do to make it easier for students to adopt them. This research requires that professors find quite effective methods that contribute to the easier adoption of idioms, but of course in a specific period of their education.

Key words: idioms, acquisition, language and culture, EFL

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and culture

Communication among people is one of the most important topics occupying linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers. That being so, the connection between language, culture and their common interactions is of great importance.

There are more than 6,000 living languages worldwide and varieties among languages are valuable for research (Kövecses, 2010). Differences and similarities between languages can clarify the main points of a language - a universal tool that people use around the world. Every language is related to the culture of its speakers. This combination of language and culture raises questions: Is culture embedded in the language, or is the language embedded in culture? Culture seems to affect language, but language is influenced by culture that exists in its own way. While language is taught, it is also important to understand culture in order to get an accurate and precise impression on people, without being biased or create an incorrect perception of their way of life. Recognizing the influence that

---

1 Specialized paper
culture has on language, people would be more motivated to study culture - especially as an addition to language studies. Culture presents guidelines for how to express an idea, but the culture itself does not create the idea. In other words, culture explains how to implement the idea, but it does not explain what the idea is. From one culture to another, human experiences are expressed the way that they are expressed through language. These experiences lead to the same idea expressed through different ways in different cultures. Benjamin Lee Worf and Edward Sapir were supporters of the views of language and its influence on culture and created the Sapir-Worf hypothesis. Both hypothesized that language is the most influential in shaping culture (Hussein, 2012). The research done for the purpose of this paper deals with the differences and similarities in the expression of universal ideas. This research is based on the idea that people share similar experiences that create universal significance.

The phenomenon of this research refers to the universal experiences that are expressed through different languages through figurative speech, which include idioms. The research shows that there are common concepts that many languages accept, or even called universal metaphors. (Kövecses, 2010). They are depicted through various expressions of speech - especially metaphors and idioms. Idioms are a special kind of expression that are used as carriers of meaning. According to Bortfield (2003) idioms are "immutable phrases that signify something other than a literal interpretation of what their particular parts indicate". Example for this would be "It's raining cats and dogs ", which means that it is pouring rain. The expression is not literal, but it expresses an idea through an image. The fascinating aspect of this figurative language is that meaning cannot be revealed when analyzing these expressions word by word. Significance, it can be said, is hidden in the context and we must explore the culture in order to discover the meaning of these expressions.

When examining language universals, figurative speech plays an important role. This is because universal or almost universal ideas while implementing the same idea use the spoken terms. Idioms often require exploring the cultural and historical background to make it easier to understand their meaning, which is often shared or transmitted among other cultures in a particular type of expression.

The role of culture can be explained only through language interaction. Culture explains how people behave on the basis of current / everyday experiences. People experience events through the lens of culture. Language and culture have the same goal - to create meaning (Kövecses, 2010). Culture emphasizes the meaning of different ways, through art, music, dance, ceremonies, and names. Unlike culture, language gives meaning through words that allow people to verbally share their experiences. Both aspects are undoubtedly accepted; each component of the culture-language relation is important and should be explored equally.

**Studying idioms**

As already mentioned, language is related to culture; Language is an instrument through which the culture and the environment of the speaker are transmitted / communicated (Yagiz & Izadpanah, 2013). Without culture, language could not survive independently. While the language needs culture, it is also dependent on language. According to Han S. J. Werner, language belongs to culture (Liu, 2012). Language not only protects and transmits culture; it is also the carrier of cultural change (Liu, Yin, & Zhang, 2014). Through language we can express the political, social and cultural ideas within a society and gain a method by which we can explain the reason on which the ideas are based, which lead to a potential change. Without the use of language, the function of which is the transfer of meaning and ideas, cultural change will remain at the level of non-linguistic ideas. Because culture without language is not really real, culture studies / studies should be based on those of the language, because their relationship is inseparable.

Researching metaphors and the significance they bring is a real challenge. Some universal ideas are transmitted through similar metaphors in other languages. An example of this is the idiom 'Do not add
fuel to the fire' that is equivalent to that in the Macedonian language "не додавај масло на огнот" - whose portable significance would be to not worsen the situation more than it is. Another way, similar metaphors carry a completely different meaning. While the English phrase 'To pull one's leg' means joking of someone's account, the Chinese language has a whole other meaning-a drawback caused by someone. Understanding idioms can be difficult to analyze if they are analyzed in part, so they should be seen as a whole, just like the way figurative language is studied (Liu, 2012, p. 2359).

**Understanding idioms and their variants**

How would people understand the phrase 'Did not spill a single bean'? It is clear that the meaning of this expression cannot be preserved in memory because the expression is new, based on the famous idol "spill the beans". If the variant of this idiom is not available in the memory, that is, the speaker has never been used / heard before, and then the meaning of the words must be used in some way to capture the meaning of this expression. There is a way that involves comparing the meaning of the elements of the original idiom and its variant, to maintain the relation between their meaning, that is, by analogy, the meaning of the variant from the view of the meaning of the original idiomatic expression.

To understand the varieties of idioms it takes longer than to understand the original form of the idiom. Original idioms require only one operation to be performed; vomiting the meaning of long-lasting memory. If for idioms variations, several additional operations are needed; seeking the meaning of the original idiom, comparing the meaning of the two idiomatic forms, identifying the link between their members, etc.

A simpler alternative model uses the meaning of the words of the variant of the idiom to come to its meaning. The main assumption of this model is that the words of the known idioms have become polysemic through frequent use in an idiomatic context. The verb and noun in the 'spill the beans' idiom have at least two meanings; their literal meaning and meaning associated with the idiomatic context. Beyond the idiomatic context, the verb spill marks outside the original location, and the word beans stands for vegetables. In an idiomatic context, these words have a dual meaning, in addition to their literal use; their idiomatic nature contains the words revealing and secretive in themselves.

**The role of the basic parts-words in idiomatic interpretations**

Coulmas (1981) considers that the case with speakers whose native / first language is not English is difficult to understand the meaning of idioms. A possible assumption that such a speaker can do is that every unknown expression on which it is inflicted is an idiom. Such a speaker has three possible sources of knowledge in order to reduce the scope of the possible meaning of the idiom: the use of logic, the structure of the lexical phrase, and the notion that some languages contain 'idiom-prone lexemes'. Taking into account these sources, a second or foreign language speaker can learn these idiomatic expressions by "performing" instead of "instructions." Through the context, the speaker will be able to extract the meaning of the idiom itself, or at least the semantic domain to which that idiom belongs, although it will not provide an awareness of when and where to use it appropriately.

There are several ways to explore the role of the meaning of words that form an idiomatic expression. Cacciari and Glucksberg (1990) studied the semantic productivity of idioms, that is, the ability of people to understand the already created and create new idiomatic meanings by altering various aspects of the individual elements of the idiom. The words that constitute idioms can be acquired with a new meaning they receive when they are part of the idiom.

**The influence of culture on idioms**
As it was already mentioned, culture stands side-to-side the language, and vice versa, so the question that arises is: How did the idioms come about and what is their background? Every idiom has its own origin and a certain time in history when it came about; every idiom brings with it its own cultural heritage. Accordingly, it can be concluded that every idiom is a story by itself, and it can enter the core only with knowledge of its "past". Below are examples of some idioms and how they came about.

That pop one's clogs - used for death or cessation of life. It is considered British Slang, dating back to the 1970s. The expression seems to be of origin either by TV drivers or by DJs. Socks (clogs) were traditional worker footwear used in multiple branches in industrialized cities and central cities in northern Britain. The shoes were intended for both men and women, who are now rarely able to meet, but at that time they were an "icon" of the working class. The sound of the workers' coggles on the cobbled streets at the end of the shifts was identified with lightning. The "to pop" verb is an old term for pledge of goods. Someone would like to "push their boots" when they no longer needed them, that is when his death was near. But it is also possible to be connected with the idiom "to pop off" (an abbreviation of pop off the hooks), which also means to die. Based on the call for evidence, it looks like a pseudo-archaic form, ever since the workers were carrying their shoes at work and exchanging items every week in order to cover the lack of money. But if other sources are taken into account, the term was used in Lincolnshire about 50 years ago, making it an example of another folk expression that was used but was not preserved in written form. Below is an example:

Once Cookie, our gray one, pops her clogs I'm going to pieces and I'm not sure whether to get another puppy, which could overcome us, or to save an older dog.

Another string to your bow - means having Plan B if other plans are not guided by the plan. This expression can mean - two wires in one arc that parry or two methods for achieving the goal. This is similar to an arc that has two or more wires to increase the force that rejects the arrow. In this way, the arrow would hit the target faster. A variation of the previous definition is to gain a new talent that will help you in your career. In other words, you have more than one skill to help you achieve your goal. This may refer to a shooter that has several different types of wires, created by materials and a level of force that differ. It should be kept in mind that all the analogies for shooters have been used since the 16th century and some have changed over time. It cannot be said that every expression is based on this explicit analogy. This idiom is commonly used outside the United States and is quite variable:

I've lost my job and I will have to retrain for something else. I wish I had another string to my bow.

Bob's your uncle is an expression that appeared before a long period in Great Britain is a kind of shout. Serves to explain how simple it is to do "You will put the cord here and you will press the red button and voila!". The most famous and, at the same time, the most attractive theory is that this expression comes from a prolonged act of political nepotism. Victorian Prime Minister Robert Salsbury has set up his successor, Arthur Ballfort, as successor. In 1887, the secretary of Ireland considered that while Balfour possessed intellectual abilities, he was not suitable for the position. The consensus was not accepted by V. Britain and so “Bob’s your uncle " has become synonymous with a guarantee of success.

You simply put on the stain remover, leave it for an hour and Bob's your uncle, the stain's gone.

A little bird told me is an idiom that indicates information received from a person who wants his / her name to remain secret. This expression does not appear in the Bible at all, but is considered to have a biblical basis. Many authors have used it throughout the centuries, including William Shakespeare, who linked birds by sending letters. The closest version to this day is the phrase of Frederick Merriat, 1833:

"A tattoo bird has whispered a secret to me ",i.e. "A little bird told me a secret".
"How did you know he was leaving?" "Oh, let's just say a little bird told me."

**Barking up the wrong tree** means making a wrong assumption for someone / something, that is, someone being wrongly "convicted". The origin of this phrase is believed to be related to dogs and hunters. The dogs are often used by hunters because of their sense of smell, their ability to persecute and monitor other animals and as a safety weapon for the hunter. After detecting the other animal, the dog will likely haunt him. The animal in danger, if it is capable, can climb the tree to save itself from the situation. But dogs are not good at climbing trees, so they will stay close to the trunk and bark, giving the hunter the knowledge of where that animal went. Sometimes, the dog may make a mistake and choose the wrong tree. In such a case, if that dog makes a mistake, it literally "barks on the wrong tree". This expression originated in the early 19th century and this idiom has been used in a figurative sense since then.

*e.g.* The boss always barks up the wrong tree every time there is a problem. She always gets mad at the wrong department.

The origin of the idiom "*Taste of one's own medicine*", comes from Aesop's famous story of the man who sold drugs among people, claiming that they can cure any disease. But after he gets sick, people give him his medicine, which you know will not help him. The transient meaning of this idiom is that one faces the same things that other people do.

*Tom talks too much - but last night he met someone who talked more than he did, and he got frustrated. He finally got a taste of his own medicine.*

"When pigs fly " is used to demonstrate a goal that is not achievable, that is, something that will *never* happen. It is often used in a humorous, even sarcastic way, when someone has an extreme ambition to something that will not happen. Also in this case the term "When hell freezes over" is used. The general agreement of this term originates from Germany or Scotland. Other creatures were placed at the place of the pig in similar phrases, but the pig took up the place as the animal that is most likely to fly. This term can be found in the most famous works as "Alice in the Wonderland" - Louis Carroll (1865): "I've a right to think," Alice said sharply. "Just about as much right," said the Duchess, "as pigs have to fly."

"Piece of cake " refers to a situation that is too easy or does not require much effort. The idea of a "piece of cake" to become a synonym for "easy" dates back to the 1870s when the cake served as a reward in the competition. In particular, there was a tradition in the United States, where slaves would encircle the cake during the rallies. The "most enthusiastic" couple who won the cake that was in the center of the circle. From this term, "Cake walk " and "Piece of cake" have become an expression that means an easy-reaching goal. The first term used in written form was written by Ogden Nash in 1936: "*Her picture is in the papers now, and life's a piece of cake.*" Today's term is most often used to describe school tests or friendly matches.

The figurative idioms, although rejected before the 20th century, have been gifted with genuine attention by the pedagogues in recent years, and this is partly due to the growth of interest, that is, the awareness that these inseparable aspects of human language are often used in everyday speech. Cooper (1999) states that idioms have an essential role in learning a foreign language and notes that most English speakers use about 20 million idioms in their lives, that is, they use the appropriate figurative language that would be a symbol of all speakers in their native language.

On the other hand, the transfer of idioms by professors and the learning of them by the students is one of the most difficult areas in mastering the language, because many of them have an arbitrary nature. As Chartiers (2002) argues, figurative idioms are a real challenge for scholars in a second language, and also for professors, because the meaning of many idioms does not come from the product of grammatical and lexical parts, which is a difficulty in introducing idioms in teaching. As a result,
finding an appropriate approach in the process of learning idioms has always been a huge interest among professors.

Contrary to this view, some linguists believe that the meaning of idioms is not entirely attributive, so that they can be simply memorized and learned by heart. They contributed to new views in the field of applied linguistics and introduced more perceptive and systematic approaches to the teaching of idioms in second-language speakers (Boers, Demecheleer, & Eyckmans, 2004).

2. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The research for the needs of this paper was conducted in the secondary school “Taki Daskalo” - Bitola, gymnasium education in May 2016 with the students from the III year, which covered 70 pupils, which represents 45% of the total number of students in the third year. The survey questionnaire consisted of 23 questions about the meaning of the listed idioms in the Macedonian language questionnaire. The research shows that no student has answered all the questions asked about the idioms.

**Importance of the research**

Idioms are an important part of the language. They should be taught and translated appropriately, as they are part of the language widely accepted as standard English (Moreno, 2011). This research will help us see the importance of idioms from two aspects; how students who do not know enough of the target culture perceive the idioms and what professors do to make it easier for students to adopt them. This research requires that professors find quite effective methods that contribute to the easier adoption of idioms, but of course in a specific period of their education.

**Objectives for conducting the research**

The purpose of the research is to see what percentage of students from the high school “Taki Daskalo” - Bitola from the III year, high school education, are familiar with the idioms - complex units that are part of the figurative language. In their anonymous surveys and data for their adoption of idioms, the goal is for students to use them fluently within the teaching, but also outside of the classroom. To achieve that level, professors should have perfected techniques and methods for teaching idioms and their successful adoption. First of all, professors are familiar with the techniques to teach students idioms in an understandable way and help them master this matter. Moreover, if their techniques do not produce solid results, professors have to find new techniques that will facilitate this adoption.

**Materials and method of work**

A survey questionnaire was used for students composed of 23 questions about the significance of idioms and a questionnaire for teachers on methods and techniques, the adoption and use of idioms on their side, composed of 5 questions.

**Questions used in the research**

In addition, the questions that were used during the research for the professors follow:

- What techniques do you use in studying idioms?
- How idioms are most easily learned?
- Do you translate them?
- Do you explain to them all the elements they consist of?
- Do you discuss the period in which they originated and how did they arise?

3. RESULTS

Results of the research conducted with the professors

Apart from the difficulties students face in understanding and using them, and at the same time professors, idioms are still an important aspect of language learning. Understanding idioms as well as
using them is a major feature of language and competence, as well as fluency that is the main goal of each professor. For this purpose, each professor recognizing his students finds his own method that will enable him to achieve this goal. Methods that almost every teacher has on the list for easier adoption of idioms are the following:

- Linking idioms with synonyms
- Understanding the idiom from the context of the sentence
- Understanding the idiom from the context of the whole text
- Explanation of idioms in Macedonian

Adoption of idioms is a long process that requires a lot of effort, both by students and by professors. The method that the professor will choose to easily adopt idioms depends on:

- The level of competence of the class
- The type of education (vocation / high school)

As for the translation of idioms, or their explanation in Macedonian, the professor shuns this method and uses it only if it is necessary. For example, if the language competence of the whole class is not high, the only option left to the professor is to translate idioms from English into Macedonian in order to facilitate their adoption. The first thing that they try is to explain the idioms according to the context. If and when that way is not successful, the professor finds idioms that are equivalent to the corresponding idiom. Later, if these two methods are not successful, the professor relies on translating idioms. This translation of idioms does not keep these idiomatic expressions in long-lasting memory; on the contrary, students only remember the translation of the idiom. In this way, the student is not sufficiently competent to use that specific idiom in everyday speech. For this reason, many professors avoid this method and aim to completely eliminate it from the process of learning a second / foreign language.

Explaining all elements of the idiom presents a real challenge for any professor. The survey showed that professors use all elements of the idiomatic expression during the study of idioms when it helps students to adopt them more easily. Idiomatic expressions carry a certain weight with themselves, so if all the elements are studied equally, students will be overloaded with information that will not even see the basic meaning of the idiom itself. Studying all elements as part of an idiom can be taught by students at a university level or those whose English is their mother tongue. Otherwise, they can make the situation difficult when adopting the idiom.

Discussing the period in which idioms originated or how they were created is also a complex process for students of English as a foreign language. But their origin may be longer in their memory, if the story narrated behind the idiom is simple and interesting to make it easier to adopt.

This research conducted with the professors showed how they are "coping" with this figurative speech in the classroom. Professors use various methods for their students to be able to adopt more easily all segments of the language. Each professor has a certain approach to a particular language field. But when it comes to such a complex part of language, everyone uses methods that have shown successful results in practice.

As for students who have never come into contact with these complex units, literal interpretation seems to be their only option. Each of them tries to connect what is known to them (culturally speaking), with which they had never previously had contact. The research has shown that students cannot even link idioms from the Macedonian language that are equivalent to those of the English language if they have not been studied previously. A literal translation was a common decision, but not always made at the exact moment. The Piece of Cake was known to most of the students, and the reason behind this was the frequent use of this idiom in early English language education in primary schools. "Bob's your uncle" seems to be the most idiosyncratic idiom listed, that is, the most difficult for a large number of students, and therefore his explanation came down to a literal translation or did not know the meaning of it at all.
In a research conducted with the students, there were idioms from three countries where English is the first language, that is, Britain, the United States and Australia. The research found that students who understood American idioms the best from the three given options. The reason behind this is that students are exposed to American culture more, that is, music, movies, food, technology, etc.

4. DISCUSSION

Much research has been done on idioms that have so far examined the various processes used to study idioms by people whose native language is English. Regardless of this, the processes involved in studying idioms from people who learn the language as a second/foreign language pose a serious challenge in acquiring their knowledge, and the result is that students have real difficulties in mastering them. In addition, although the second/foreign language learners should learn how to use idioms in everyday speech, much of the research on idioms and their understanding and problems associated with their creation are not solved. Thus, the other problem faced by students in English is how idioms are formed and how they are understood.

Without taking these issues into account, many idioms have a cultural basis and range from one language to another. Understanding and using idioms would be difficult for many Macedonian students who study English as a foreign language if they are not familiar with the culture of people in places where English is the mother tongue. The purpose of this research is to get acquainted with the methods used by professors in teaching this part of the figurative language and the knowledge of idioms by students in the early stages of their education.

The most frequently answered question about the meaning of idioms is the idiom 'Piece of cake' (meaning), where 76% of the respondents knew its meaning. The most outspoken answer was about the meaning of the idiom 'Bob’s your uncle’, whose significance was not known to any student. At the same time, a survey was conducted on the use of idioms in the educational process and methods used by the teachers.

5. CONCLUSION

The English language is one of the vastest and most vivid languages in the world. It is made up of over 1.5 million words. Over and above that, the same word can have a variety of different meanings depending on the context it is put in; two (or more) words can have the exact same spelling but are pronounced differently, depending on their meanings. It is important to point out that idioms use language in a non-literal (and sometimes metaphorical) way. This implies that ‘the meaning of the idiomatic expression cannot be deduced by looking at the meaning of the individual words that it is made up of’ (Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language, David Crystal). Another important feature to point out is that idioms are fixed, which means that people cannot just decide to make up their own. That is why their acquisition is quite complex, but once learned, they represent an indispensable fortune and a great source for talking “creatively”.

REFERENCES


