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ADAPTABILITY FOR IDIOMS TOWARD ACHIEVING VIABILITY

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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions form a tricky area for a non-native speaker of any given language. Even a non-native speaker who learns the grammar of a language in an attempt to master the same often feels diffident when exposed to idioms. As idioms reflect the cultural side of a particular people and retain those cultural aspects in their own fossilized expressions, they at large do not convey the meaning overtly as they are figurative by nature and thereby make it difficult for non-native speakers to learn and understand. The syntactic arrangements of idioms and the traditional notion that the words and their ordering are fixed and sacrosanct make it harder for foreigners to master them. This aspect is common to idioms in world languages in general that include English idioms as well. That said, this paper argues for some adaptability or flexibility in the use of English idioms with particular regard to their words and their arrangements that may enable non-native speakers, Tamils in this case, to approach those expressions with greater ease.

Keywords: idioms, non-native, adaptability, viability

Introduction

Darwin propounds that only the fittest of organisms will survive and he further asserts that the fittest are those that are “best adjusted to their environment” (Cunningham), or, in other words, only those beings that have the capacity to adapt themselves to suit the ever changing environment will last. This naturalistic premise makes sense not only in the realms of the flora and fauna on the landscape that we have inhabited but also that of the languages that facilitate human communication.

An offshoot of the Teutonic and the Romance, “the noblest languages in modern Europe” (McMordie4), English has become a universal language. It is rich with “material ground” work and “spiritual conceptions” owing to its aforementioned origin. The richness of its content and simplicity of its form are the remarkable features that have made the language universal, whereas, what has made it viable is its flexibility with the readiness to adopt and assimilate words and expressions from other languages. Commenting on the greatness of the English language, Grimm, as quoted by Mc Mordie, says, “In wealth, good sense and closeness of structure, no

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other languages at this day spoken deserves to be compared with it” (4).

Idioms as Fossilized

English is a language which is inclusive and elastic. Down the ages it has sustained changes in pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and to an extent grammar too. While it remains flexible at all these levels, what kindles one’s interest is its rigidity with regard to the use of idiomatic expressions. As a rule, idioms are not to be changed and it is feared that exposure of idioms to changes will result in their eventual corruption and ultimate destruction. While this may be a native speaker’s apprehension, a non-native speaker’s concern is that because of this rigidity idioms may be alienated from their use of the English language. So, there is a need to verify the validity of this nervousness followed by a mechanism to surmount it and hence this reflection.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines an idiom as “a group of words in a fixed order having a particular meaning, different from the meanings of each word understood on its own” (“Idiom”). Chitra Fernando classifies idioms into three ‘sub-classes’ such as *Pure idioms* (e.g. spill the beans, red herring), *Semi-idioms* (e.g. blue film, blue joke) and *Literal idioms* (e.g. on foot, waste not want not). Of the three types, the argument of this paper is confined to ‘Pure idiom’ which is described as “a type of

conventionalized, non-literal multiword expression” (32-36).

It is no exaggeration to say that effective communication in English is incomplete, if not impossible, if idiomatic expressions are excluded. As Mc Mordie observes, “Idiomatic turns of expressions are usually forcible, terse, and vivid; the same meaning could be set forth in some other way, but not with equal force and brevity” (5). For example, ‘I found myself in a very uncomfortable situation’ is surely not as effective as saying ‘I felt like a fish out of water.’ ‘I had to accept something unpleasant’ is surely less expressive when compared with the idiom ‘I had to bite the bullet.’

It could be noticed how happy a non-native speaker is when he has used an English idiom correctly in his conversation with others. He feels elated, and even successful in mastering the language. But, when the same speaker becomes a listener exposed to an unfamiliar idiomatic expression, he feels awkward, uncomfortable, even annoyed and turns hostile to idioms on the whole. Thus, a foreigner’s relationship with English idioms is one of love-hate, and his attitude toward them seems to be unpredictable and inconsistent depending on his familiarity or unfamiliarity with them. Accordingly, he tends to consider idioms either as powerful vehicles of thought or unnecessary impediments in communication. As a result,

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the use of idioms among non-native speakers is perceived to be on the decline. If this kind of situation continues, idioms may be kept away from a non-native speaker’s use of the English language and ultimately become the private property of some linguistic aristocracy.

Proposed Adaptability

When the idiomatic side of a language is known to be very difficult for a foreigner to learn, the necessity to simplify the same acquires greater importance than ever. Experience, observation and enquiry reveal that better understanding of an English idiom is possible for a non-native speaker only with the help of a vernacular equivalent. In the Indian context, when a teacher exposes their students to an unfamiliar English idiomatic expression, the teacher has to explain the idiom first, and then draw a parallel from the vernacular, in order to get students the exact meaning and sense of the foreign idiom with its due intensity. It is not debatable that native idioms are spontaneously acquired along with the respective native language whereas foreign idioms are consciously learnt. So, one learns a foreign idiom with its precise meaning only by correlating it with the

vernacular equivalent s/he has already acquired. This may be so due to the universality of human experience transcending space and time. However, this is not always easy for a non-native speaker in their attempt to use an English idiom which is fixed, conventional and often idiosyncratic.

Only against this backdrop, some adaptability is proposed in the use of English idioms for the benefit of non-native speakers. This may be considered to be on line with the argument: “Although idioms are known to impose rigid selection restrictions there are idioms that maintain their idiomatic meaning even when some of their lexical components are substituted with others” (Sheinfux 50). The following changes are suggested mainly from an English teacher’s experience with the students whose mother tongue is Tamil. Indeed the proposed adaptability is minimal and reasonable as this is just an attempt to relax the rigidity of the English idioms. For instance, the following idioms can accommodate the proposed modifications which are otherwise treated as mistakes or expressions that are non-existent.

No.	Original English Idioms	Tamil Equivalents	Modified English Version/s (Possible)
1	Build castle in the air	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Aahayaththulakoettaikatturadhu</i>	Build castle in the sky
2	New broom	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□	New broom

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	sweeps clean	<i>Pudhuvilakkamaarunallaperukkum</i>	sweeps well
3	Split hairs	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Mandayapichukkuradhu</i>	Split head
4	Behind the scenes	□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Thiraimaraivil</i>	Behind the curtain
5	Work like a horse	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Maadumaadhiriulaikkiradhu</i>	Work like an ox
6	Carry coal to Newcastle	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kollanpatrayilaoosivikiradhu</i>	Carry lignite to Neiveli
7	Tom, Dick and Harry	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>KuppanumSuppanum</i>	Kuppan and Suppan
8	Kill two birds with one stone	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Ore kallilrendumaangaai</i>	Hit two mangoes with one stone
9	Wolf in sheep's clothing	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Pasuththoelporthiyapuli</i>	Tiger in cow's skin
10	Make hay while the sun shines	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kaatrullapotheythootrikkol</i>	Winnow while the wind blows

In the first five examples cited above just one content-word at the end of each idiom changes, but, the idiomaticity of the expression remains unchanged. The other five are fully modified versions of the original English idioms with changes based on their Tamil equivalents. In those versions the content words and also the corresponding images they evoke change whereas both the sense and the structure remain the same. These modified versions may seem to be obscure and provincial at the outset, but the English language is either capable of assimilating those changes and making them universal in course of time, or

at least being tolerant to such changes made by certain non-native speakers in an attempt to customize certain English idioms.

In this context, one need not fear that this proposed *adaptability* of idioms, though limited, may *destroy* them. Because, we cannot ignore the fact that only “some idioms are lexically flexible and others are not” (Gibbs 58). Many of the English idiomatic expressions are such that they could hardly be modified, and that apart, despite the glaring archetypal similarities among idioms in multi languages, the influence of a non-English vernacular,

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Tamil for instance, over the English idioms be treated as examples of that. are perhaps negligible. The following may

No.	Original English Idioms	Tamil Equivalent	Modified English Version/s
1	To bell the cat	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Poonaiikkumanikatturadhu</i>	Not possible
2	Through the back door	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kollaiykkama</i>	"
3	Crocodile tears	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Mudhalaikkanneer</i>	"
4	Devil quoting the Bible	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Saathanvedhamodhuradhu</i>	"
5	Stab in the back	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Mudhuhilkuthuradhu</i>	"
6	Cat on the wall	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Madhilmelpoonai</i>	"
7	Yes-man	□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Aamaamsaami</i>	"
8	Frog in the well	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kinatruththavalai</i>	"
9	Cut one's throat	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>kaluththarukkiradhu</i>	"
10	Throw dust in eyes	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kannulamannaiththoovuradhu</i>	"
11	A dog in the manger	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Vakyapporlanaai</i>	"
12	See with jaundiced eyes	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kaamaalaikkannu</i>	"
13	Wash one's hands off	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kaiya kaluvuradhu</i>	"
14	An eye sore	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kannuuruththal</i>	"
15	Spread like wild fire	□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ <i>Kaatuth thee polaparavuradhu</i>	"

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Conclusion

Thus the discourse against the rigidity of the English idioms concludes with reiteration of the plea to the teachers of English to condone the so-called ‘mistakes’ of the past as harmless ‘changes’ of the present, provided such changes do not mar the meaning or the beauty of the idioms. In order to keep idioms open to all in a globalized, multilingual and multicultural context, and also to save them from falling into oblivion, this adaptability for English idioms is favoured, and arguably, this may make the use of idioms easier for the non-native speakers. It is an earnest hope that this will not destroy idioms but rather make them a more accessible and viable tool of communication.

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