Rethinking Approaches to Idioms and Idiomaticity

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Abstract—**In early generative approaches, idiomaticity was equated with non-compositionality, and it was regarded as a binary concept, dividing language into idioms and non-idioms. Idioms were assigned only a marginal status in language. This paper summarizes findings from studies in discourse analysis, phraseology, and psycholinguistics that have shown that idiomaticity is better conceived of as a phenomenon that is multifactorial in nature, scalar in nature, and deserves a central position in any grammatical theory.**

Keywords—idioms; discourse analysis; phraseology; psycholinguistics

I. INTRODUCTION

The term idiom has basically two meanings; one meaning refers to "the ability to speak a fluent and appropriate version of a language" (Grant and Bauer 2004: 39), which is also referred to as "native-like selection" (Pawley and Syder 1983:191). With respect to the second meaning, which is the one of interest here, a widely quoted definition can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary:

A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one.(OED 1989 s.v. idiom)

This definition obviously does not provide a precise and watertight definition of idiomaticity, since it is only vaguely paraphrased. As this section will show, the reason for this vagueness is probably due to the fact that the picture of idiomaticity that emerges from linguistic research is far too complex and unsettled to find its way into an unambiguous and crisp dictionary entry.

The early definition of idioms as units which display phrase-like behavior in some respects but word-like behavior in others, paired with the predominance of generative grammar throughout most of the twentieth century, relegated them to the margins of linguistics (Sonomura 1996: 28). More recently, however, the generative-transformational paradigm with its sharp distinction between syntax and the lexicon, its primary emphasis on syntax and relative neglect of semantics for an adequate description of language, and its claim that the core grammar of the human language faculty is actually innate, has triggered a variety of critical responses from the fields of linguistics, psycholinguistics and psychology. Given the diversity of perspectives and the fact their motivations only partially overlapped, it is difficult to provide a brief summary of the major consequences that these studies have had on our understanding of idioms and idiomaticity — as a matter of fact, as perspectives on idioms and idiomaticity diversified, so have definitions of these terms. However, one can reasonably group most studies into major streams of research that have contributed to our changed understanding of idioms and idiomaticity. They are grounded in their perception that semantic, pragmatic, and functional issues of language are hugely underrated in generative grammar, and that these aspects actually deserve a central role in linguistic description and theory.

The present section will briefly introduce recent developments of idiomaticity-related research in discourse analysis, phraseology, and most importantly, cognitive linguistics, which have ascribed idioms and idiomaticity a much more central role. A comprehensive presentation of all these different approaches is not relevant here; moreover, there are many excellent overviews of the chronological development of idiomaticity and phraseology research, so there is no need to recap those here either. Instead, this section briefly fleshes out the major changes in the conceptualization of idiomaticity in order to establish a basis for the model developed here. Therefore, the discussion is deliberately selective and oversimplifying (for a comprehensive review of the history of studies on idiomaticity, cf., e.g. Sonomura (1996: chapter 3) and Moon (1998). Wray (2002: part I) is a recent overview of definitions and models on formulaic phrases in general (cf. also Cowie and Howarth (1996) for a select bibliography on phraseology). The three most important changes in the view of idioms and idiomaticity concern the following three issues:

First, how much of language can be referred to as idiomatic? That is, can only phrases be idiomatic, or are lexical items idiomatic, too? Are only idioms idiomatic, or is idiomaticity a property that transcends the boundaries of core idioms and actually characterizes most, if not all of language, to some extent?

Second, if we allow for different kinds of lexical and phrasal items to exhibit certain degrees of idiomaticity, the ultimate question is what kind of theoretical model can handle this continuum, and how core idioms relate to other kinds of idiomatic constructions within that model.

Third, what reflects idiomaticity in the first place? Is it founded only on non-compositionality, or do we have to take other variation parameters like lexico-grammatical fixedness, transformational deficiency, etc. into account?

II. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE RELEVANCE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

Discourse analysis, the analysis of language beyond the syntactic level, experienced a strong revival in the 1970s and 1980s. Theories focused on the functional, cultural, and interactional properties of language and the direct consequences they have for the shape that language takes, e.g. Conversation Analysis (Sacks et al. 1974), Interactional Sociolinguistics (Schiffrin 1994) and Variation Analysis (Labov 1972). The major accomplishment of these approaches with regard to idiomaticity is that they all emphasize that phraseological units are not a marginal phenomenon in language. In contrast, they show that phraseological units, which may be idiomatic to different extents, are highly prominent and therefore indispensable units of a language. These multi-word expressions are labelled formulas (Pawley and Syder 1983), prefabricated language (Hakuta 1986), conversational routines (Hymes 1962, Coulmas 1981), scripts (Ellis 1984) or non-propositional speech (Van Lancker 1975). Studies range from very specific and detailed analyses of idiomatic constructions (e.g. Drew and Holt (1995) on the function of idiomatic phrases as topic termination or transition markers) to large-scale attempts to devise a function-based taxonomy of formulaic sequences. Nattinger and De Carrico (1992), for example, present a threefold functional taxonomy that categorizes different formulaic sequences as "social interactions", "necessary topics" and "discourse devices", while Aijmer (1996) presents a functional taxonomy specifically for conversational routines.

While many formulaic sequences can be ascribed a discourse-functional or social role, it has also been pointed out that by no means all formulaic sequences can be described functionally. Cowie (1988) distinguishes "formulae" (which have discourse-functional or interactional roles) from what he refers to as "composites", which "function as constituents in sentences... and contribute to their referential, or propositional meaning" (Cowie 1988: 134). Moon's (1992) category of "informational fixed expressions" serves the same purpose.

None of these approaches is specifically geared at developing a model of grammar. Most of them are descriptive rather than explanatory in nature, which is sometimes taken issue with, as in Wray's (2002: 53) critical stance towards Nattinger and De Carrico's (1992) functional taxonomy. However, they substantially contribute to grammatical theorizing by pointing to the relevance of phraseological units in actual communication. Any grammatical theory that strives to be compatible with actual observational data has to be able to integrate and account for these items.

Ultimately, the growing recognition of the relevance of phraseological units has also stipulated discussions about the possibility of accounting for them in more recent generative approaches, for example Culicover (1999) on phraseologisms such as had better or not -topics, or Jackendoff (1997) on the "time" away construction as exemplified in We're twisting the night away. This increasing attention to idioms may have far-reaching consequences; as Gries (2008) comments, the acknowledgment of phraseologisms as theoretically relevant units begins "to undermine the modular organization of the linguistic system" and raises awareness for "subtle interdependencies on different levels of linguistic analysis", a fact that has long been recognized in cognitive-linguistic approaches to grammar.

III. THE COLLOCATION-IDIOM CONTINUUM IN PHRASEOLOGY

The second large group of studies that contributed to our understanding of idioms and idiomaticity comes from the field of phraseology itself. In early generative approaches, idioms were mostly treated as exceptions which had to be stored in a separate part of the lexicon, a "phrase-idiom-part", which was different from the "lexical part" (Katz and Postal 1963). Phraseological models, in contrast, do not assign idioms a special status outside of any established category, but instead regard idioms as a subcategory of multi-word units: "All idioms are formulas but not all formulas are idioms (in the strict sense of a construction with an unpredictable meaning or irregular form); most are not idioms" (Pawley 1985: 89). Moreover, the boundaries between idioms, collocations, and other multi-word units are fuzzy; they are seen as overlapping to some extent on a continuum of fixed expressions (Cowie and Mackin 1975, Cowie et al. 1983, Alexander 1984, Carter 1987, Nattinger and De Carrico 1992). This has several important consequences for a definition of the term idiomaticity.

First, since idiomaticity is a term that tries to capture the idiosyncrasies of all multi-word units on such a continuum, the term no longer covers only aspects of non-compositionality, but also embraces formal fixedness. This is reflected in Fernando and Flavell's (1981: 17) criteria for idiomaticity:

- the meaning of the idiom is not the result of the compositional function of its constituents;

- an idiom is a unit that either has a homonymous literal counterpart or at least individual constituents that are literal, though the expression as a whole is not interpreted literally;

- idioms are transformationally deficient in one way or another;

- idioms constitute set expressions in a given language;

- idioms are institutionalized.

Secondly, idiomaticity is no longer a property of core idioms alone: both non-compositionality and formal fixedness can be present to different degrees in a given multi-word expression. Ultimately, this leads to a view of idioms as a subset of collocations, with non-compositionality being a secondary idiomatic variation parameter. The overarching parameter that all phrases on the idiomaticity continuum share is some restriction in terms of their degree of variability. As Fernando (1996) puts it:

Idioms and idiomaticity, while closely related, are not identical... In sum, while habitual co-occurrence produces idiomatic expressions, both canonical and non-canonical, only those expressions which become conventionally fixed in a specific order and lexical form, or have only a restricted set of variants, acquire the status of idioms.

In other words, idioms (in the sense of more or less idiomatic expressions) are defined as "conventionalized multi-word expressions often, but not always, non-literal" (Fernando 1996: 38); as Wray (2002: 34) puts it: "An alternative use of the transparency and regularity gauge might be in subcategorizing types of formulaic sequence. In other words, the feature ± idiom could be a defining variable in a typology of formulaic sequences along a continuum from fully bound to fully free". Fernando's (1996: 32) continuum of multi-word units is taken into consideration.

Idioms and collocations are still conceived of as being two different lexical types, but they are related in that they only differ in terms of their degree of variability. Compositionality does not sufficiently discriminate between the two: both literal and non-literal expressions occur both in the idiom and the habitual collocations column; conversely, only variable items occur in the habitual collocations column.

Another continuum model proposed by Howarth (1998: 28) is very similar to the one proposed by Fernando (1996) in that it also calls upon semantic and syntactic information: he distinguishes between free combinations, restricted collocations, figurative idioms and pure idioms. While the non-idiomatic end of the continuum is mainly characterized by formal fixedness, the idiomatic end of the scale is determined by non-compositionality of meaning. In sum, the major contribution of phraseology is to build a bridge between the recognition of the importance of formulaic language in approaches to discourse on the one hand and grammatical theories on the other by addressing the question how idiomatic phrases relate to other kinds of multi-word units in a phraseological model.

IV. IDIOMATICITY AS A MULTIFACTORIAL CONCEPT: PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACHES

As already suggested, early generative approaches equated idiomaticity exclusively with non-compositionality: "The essential feature of an idiom is that its full meaning, and more generally the meaning of any sentence containing an idiomatic stretch, is not a compositional function of the meanings of the idiom's elementary grammatical parts" (Katz and Postal 1963: 275, also Weinreich 1969: 26). However, even early generative studies point towards the difficulty in making a categorical distinction between what is idiomatic and what is not (Fraser (1966: 59, N. 3) for the difficulty of obtaining unanimous judgements, and Cowie and Mackin (1993: ix) and Gibbs (1994: Ch. 5-6) for discussion). A growing number of psycholinguistic studies are devoted to the question: How do we comprehend what idioms mean? And consequently: How are idioms acquired?

Native speaker intuitions obviously strongly accord with those phraseological models that postulate that not all idioms are totally non-compositional, but many of them are partially motivated and analyzable, and they differ in the extent to which they are analyzable (e.g. Cacciari and Glucksberg 1991, Gibbs 1992, 1993, Gibbs and Nayak 1989).

Beyond strengthening the hypothesis that analyzability is a scalar phenomenon, several studies have drawn a connection between the different degrees of analyzability and speakers' intuitions about other properties of an idiom. For instance, Gibbs and Nayak (1989) demonstrate that native speakers judge idioms ranking higher in compositionality as more syntactically flexible than non-compositional idioms. In a similar fashion, Gibbs et al. (1989) argue that degrees of semantic analyzability influence speakers' intuitions about lexical flexibility, such that, e.g. button your lips can be altered into fasten your lips without the idiomatic meaning being lost, because button your lips is a relatively compositional phrase. Punt the bucket instead of kick the bucket, in contrast, no longer means "to die", which is explained by the fact that kick the bucket cannot be semantically decomposed. Mc Glone and et al (1994) find a correlation between analyzability and semantic productivity, namely find the possibility to create new but related idiom meanings by substituting component parts. For instance, speakers readily assign shatter the ice as a variant of break the ice with the slightly different meaning "to break down an uncomfortable and stiff social situation flamboyantly in one fell swoop!" As found by Mc Glone and et al (1994), the comprehension of such variants depends on speakers' familiarity with the original idiom.

Several studies have also provided evidence that the perceived analyzability of idiomatic phrases does not reside in linguistic competence, but is actually conceptually grounded (which in turn strengthens the case for cognitive-linguistic models). Nayak and Gibbs (1990), Gibbs and Nayak (1991) and Gibbs (1992) present a series of experiments that uniformly show how "people's knowledge of the metaphorical links between different source and target domains provides the basis for the appropriate use and interpretation of idioms" (Gibbs, 1995: 107).

V. CONCLUSION

In sum, research from different disciplines such as discoursal, phraseological and psycholinguistic research has suggested that idiomaticity is best conceived of as a scalar and complex concept, and that any multi-word expression can be placed on a collocation-idiom continuum according to its idiomaticity.

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