A SHORT CONTRASTIVE APPROACH OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC MODEL OF IDIOM VARIATION - WITH FOCUS ON CONCEPTUAL VARIATION OF IDIOMS DENOTING FAILURE

Ana-Maria Birtalan
Lecturer, PhD, Ecological University of Bucharest

Abstract: Starting from Langlotz's idea that there is a relationship between idioms, idiom variation and the architecture of the human cognitive capacity meant to develop a coherent cognitive linguistic model of the mental representation of idiomatic creativity, we shall try to explain some models of idiom motivation by means of idiomatic activation-sets(the term used by Langlotz to refer to the „mental network that can be potentially activated when a idiom is used)(Langlotz, 2006, pag 95). Whether an idiomatic expression is used creatively in specific context depends on the degree to which the user can manipulate the original idiom to suit his or her purpose. Our attempt is to render a few examples of expressions and/or phraseologisms which denote the concept of failure, to include them in contexts and analyse their pragmatic, stylistic, discursive effect.

Keywords: implicature, discourse analysis, idiomatic creativity, motivation, cognitive capacity.

Each idiomatic activation-set is made up of various symbolic and semantic substructures associated with the idiom, the coordination and activation of which triggers the behaviour of the idiom.

Whether an idiomatic expression is used creatively in specific context depends on the degree to which the user can manipulate the original idiom to suit his or her purpose.

We shall start with a short theoretical frame of the meaning, denotative and connotative aspects of idioms, in general.

Different definitions of meaning have been suggested different linguists in the study of the meaning system of language, but according to what has long been the most widely accepted theory of semantics, **meaning** is the **idea** or **concept**, which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer by embodying it in linguistic symbols, or meaning refers to what is meant, or intended to be indicated or understood. For example, when a speaker says, I bought a pen yesterday the listener understands what the speaker means according to the strings of the sounds he has produced, that is, according to the sound symbols.

Words in a language can be classified into **content or notional word and function words**. A content word can be defined by some **semantic features**. In general, a word will have at least one semantic "defining" feature. For instance, the word dog has the semantic feature: [**+ Animate**] **Animate** nouns may be **human or animal, male or female, young or old**. **Inanimate** nouns may he **concrete or abstract**. Some nouns may share some semantic features. For example, girl, woman, maiden, witch, actress, spinster and wife have the identical semantic features; **[+Female],[+Human] , [+Animate].**

A content word, when used in a sentence, usually has two kinds of meaning; lexical meaning and grammatical meanings. The lexical meaning of a word refers to the senses that a speaker attaches to a linguistic element as a symbol of an actual object or event. It may cover both denotative, conceptual or cognitive meaning, and associated meanings. The denotative meaning of a word is the basic or conceptual meaning which is based on or

BDD-V4837 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:44 UTC)

abstracted from the physical object or the abstract idea. It covers al! the semantic features necessary to define the word. The denotative or conceptual meaning of a word is the central factor in linguistic communication. Speakers of a language cannot talk about their knowledge of a physical object or natural phenomenon unless the word that signifies the actual physical object or idea has the same meaning for all the speakers of the language. So the denotative meaning of a word involves the relationship between the word and the actual object or abstract idea that exists outside language. For instance, if one talks about a pen, without the presence of the actual object, by just giving the denotative meaning: "An instrument for writing or drawing in ink", it is readily understood by all English speakers. So it is the denotative meaning of lexical items that makes communication possible.

The associated meaning of a word may be subdivided into: connotative meaning, social or stylistic meaning, affective meaning, collective meaning and thematic meaning.

The connotative meaning of a word refers to the emotional association which the word suggests, in addition to its explicit denotative meaning. For instance, the word *mother* denotes a " female parent", but, it generally connotes lime, care and tenderness, when it is used in particular contexts.

Many phraseologists have noticed that it is impossible to capture the linguistic anatomy of idioms without relying on a set of different definitory dimensions

Traditionally, idioms such as *grasp the nettle, blow the gaff* or *trip the light fantastic* have been described as conventionalmulti-word units that are semantically opaque and structurally fixed. Thus theinternal organization of idiomatic constructions can show more or less striking semantic characteristics, structural peculiarities and different constraints or restrictions on their lexico- grammatical behavior which cannot be explained by the general grammatical rules of the given language.

Nevertheless, idioms are conventional expressions that belong to the grammar of a given language and fulfill specific+ communicative functions.

In short, idiomatic constructions can be described as complex symbols with specific formal, semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic characteristics. The following table summarizes these definitory features and patterns along with the semiotic dimensions of form, meaning and grammatical status. Thus, the parameters of the structure of idioms will comprise a certain degree of conventionalism, grammatically speaking, will have a formal complexity of construction (a multiword unit), its meaning will not be derived from constituent words and, in terms of variability, they will be frozen.

Belonging to the grammatical system of a given speech community, idioms are linguistic constructions that have gone through a sociolinguistic process of conventionalisation. To capture an idiom's degree of familiarity and conventionality within a given speech community, the term *institutionalisation* is used.

Fraser's notion of *frozenness* is adopted as a generic term to capture lexico-grammatical

restrictions (Fraser 1970). Frozenness can influence the variability of the lexical constituents and the grammatical behaviour.

In other words, the overall meaning of an idiomatic construction is a semantic extension from the compositional result of the meanings of its lexical constituents. The relationship between an idiom's overall meaning and the sum of the meaning of the constituents reflects a *pattern of figuration*. Since idioms are institutionalized expressions, they extended meaning – and with it the conveyed pattern of figuration – has become fixed in the lexicon of a given

speech community. Thus, the idiomatic meaning represents the lexicalized extended meaning of the construction.

BDD-V4837 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:44 UTC)

Finally, idioms can serve different communicative purposes involving different types of ideational, interpersonal and textual functions (Fernando,1996). Prototypical idioms primarily serve an ideational function serve an ideational function. For instance, *grasp the nettle* communicates an experience or event (tackle a problem).

But the question that pops in here is what happens with idioms in terms of meaning. Langlotz gives a preliminary definition of idioms in his work "Idiomatic Creativity" pointing out their structural and semantic behavior.

Thus, an idiom is „an institutionalized construction that is composed of two or more lexical items and has the composite structure of a phrase or semi-clause, which may feature idiosyncracy" (Langlotz, pg 6). Moreover, the main function of an idiom in a context is to determine the discourse and its semantic structure.

Each idiomatic activation-set is made up of various symbolic and semantic substructures associated with the idiom, the coordination and activation of which triggers the behaviour of the idiom.

As we have mentioned earlier, whether an idiomatic expression is used creatively in specific context depends on the degree to which the user can manipulate the original idiom to suit his or her purpose. This will lead us to the potentially fruitful association of idioms with the concept of creativity.

Chomsky (1965, 1971) has placed the notion of *linguistic creativity* at the very centre of his approach to language, putting an emphasis on the rule-driven productivity of language, according to which the linguistic structures are derived through the combination between the lexicon and syntax. Other linguists (Halliday,1978, Pawley and Syder, 1983, Sinclair 1987) followed the Chomsky's line of reasoning, and the notion of *idiom principle* was born. Thus, according to Sinclair (1987) the creativity principle cannot give a full account of linguistic production and the interpretation must be completed by the idiom principle:

"*The principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him or her large a number of semi-pre constructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments. To some extent this may reflect the recurrence of similar situations in human affairs; it may illustrate a natural tendency to economy of effort; or it may be motivated in part by the exigencies of real-time conversation. However, it arises, it has been relegated to an inferior position in most current linguistics, because it does not fit the open-choice model." (Sinclair 1987: 320)*

With regard to the processing of idioms, this view further implies that idioms are not freely formed grammatical constructions, rather they are directly reproduced from the mental lexicon. In other words, although idioms consistently instantiate relatively stable idiomatic constructions, their uses in different contexts involve, beside the application of regular grammatical processes including adnominal modification, passivisation, lexical substitution, pluralisation and the flexible use of determiners, also impregnates the assertions with a certain discourse value and connotation.

Thus, idiom-variation data question the strict dichotomy between the creativity principle and the idiom principle. Idiom creativity implies that idiom production and comprehension are subject to a dynamic contextual interpretation.

In what follows, we shall try to illustrate how the variation of an idiomatic construction in a specific usage- event involves variational creativity, the idiom, taken as a whole, is manipulated as a mental configuration to adapt it to the communicative demands emerging in the specific context of use. We took, for illustrations, the idioms which render the idea of "failure'. The concept of "failure" was rendered in many idioms. A great number of idioms in English profile literal scenes related to their nature, attitude and behavior in

BDD-V4837 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:44 UTC)

different contexts and experiences building up scenarios, that , due to their repetitive occurrence, ended by being frozen in fixed constructions.

We shall defend the broad vision of pragmatics based on the two categories: the producer's intention and motivation (illocutionary act) and the effect the contents of the idiom has on the receiver

(perlocutionary act).

The general connotative meaning of the idioms selected for analysis introduce the idea of not being able, from different reasons, due to certain circumstances, to carry out a task, achieve one's goal, reach the target:

1. fail in something one is trying to do (this includes: having the opposite result)
e.g.: ***get a cropper, hit the rock bottom, crash and burn, fall by the wayside, come to naught*** **etc.**
2. (cause) an activity, event, method, or plan etc (to) fail(s), i.e. it does not produce what
it was intended to achieve
e.g.: ***can't stand the pace, on your last legs, down for the count, bump along the bottom,*** **etc.**
3. be defeated in a competitive situation
e.g.: ***meet your Waterloo, get the wooden spoon,*** **etc.**
4. reach the point of failure:
e.g.: ***hit the buffers, a blind alley,*** **etc.**
4. (be in) a bad situation which is likely to cause failure
e.g.: ***go through hell, between a rock and a hard place, walk a tightrope*****, etc.**
5. (cause) problems that spoil chances of success and are likely to cause failure
e.g.: ***stir up a hornet's nest, cut one's own throat,*** **etc.**
Let us take some examples provided by literary contexts:

1. „....he fails in all he sets his mind upon .....he labours and he has got a cropper for his pains so far!" (Gaskell, *North and South", pg. 233)*
2. „ We have not yet met our Waterloo, Watson, this is our Marengo" (A.D. Doyle, *Return of Sherlock Holmes"*, pg. 219)
3. „Yes, I can confirm that" said Mollenhauer quietly, seeing his own little private plan for browbeating Cowperwood out of his street-railway shares go glimmering. He realized it now: the curtain will soon come down, as the plot thickens....." (Th. Dreiser, *„An American Tragedy")*

The first example represents an expressive instance which the author chooses to use in her attempt to convey the general idea of failing. She picked the idiom „to get the cropper", opting for a more intricate formula than an accessible piece of language which would require only the specification of the intended referent that would make it readily interpretable. So, the reader is ready to surpass the mere transactional use of the idiom (that is, the transference of information and the decoding of the idiom) and value the expressiveness of the piece of language, the reflexive intention of the writer, including the text into a certain register and appreciating it more. Moreover, the use of this idiom instead of a simple lexical verb increases the illocutinaryy force at the discourse level. In other words, we can claim that the idiom variation is the effect of manipulating and idiomatic construction relative to the underlying conceptual correspondences that shape its creative, internal semantic structure.

The second example introduces us into another type of discourse intention. The idiom used there, " to meet our Waterloo" unveils a different relation between sense and force. So,

BDD-V4837 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:44 UTC)

we have to appeal to extensive-metaphor systems to motivate their internal semantic structure. First of all, the semantic representation of the idiom, its face-value meaning is conditioned by the fact that the writer and reader should share the same linguistic and cultural background. In other words, the reader should figure out the implicature rendered by the very idiom resorting to their historical knowledge (they should know what major defeat took place at Waterloo). Secondly, the first idiom is correlated in the discourse to another one which, again, appeals to the reader's knowledge of the events (Marengo refers to the Battle of Marengo In Italy in which Napoleon's forces were surprised by an Austrian attack and came close to defeat). Thirdly, this metaphorical model has a powerful and colorful textual implicature attempting to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer.

As we mentioned earlier, idioms can also be motivated by one –shot and image metaphors. In the third example, we have an illustration of the type. The example contains two idioms. The first idiom refers to the end of an activity in terms of the end of a theatre performance by highlighting the moment when the stage curtain comes down. Since this event marks the end of a very lively activity , the idiom denotes the character's failure as well as death. The implicature is at place, the reader grasps it and the illocutionary effect is granted. The second construction can be related semantically to the developmental model, in according to which idea, an image of density or impenetrability is evoked by the verb *thickens.* The connotation is also drama- specific, in the sense that there are obstacles in the character's way that can not be surpassed, thus, he fails.

Conclusions. Each of these metaphorical models constitutes a complex system, i.e. a conceptual network that consists of more specific subordinated metaphors that instantiate and elaborate it. The motivation of specific idioms relative to these conceptual backgrounds is shaped by metonymic links, emblematic associations, blending and complex interactions between them. The semantic and pragmatic poles of these units constitute a complex conceptual scene: the abstract scene comprising the idiomatic meaning is conceived against the conceptual background of a literal scene. Moreover, the idiomatic creativity rendered in literary contexts is meant to create a more both expressive and challenging piece of discourse, appealing to the reader's ability to relate the association between the literal and the idiomatic meaning to complex patterns of conceptual metaphor, blending and emblems.

The model was applied to analyze the mental representation and variation of idioms related to the concept of failure, proving that idioms are not semantically-unmotivated, but conceived as motivationally, cognitively and pragmatically functional. It was proved that idiom variation is the process by which an idiomatic construction is adapted to the usage-context to fulfil both its cognitive and pragmatic function.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. **Cowie, A. P., R.Mackin,& I. R.McCaig** (1993). Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms. Oxford:Oxford University Press.
2. **Halliday, M.A.K**. (1985). An introduction to functional grammar. London: Edward Arnold.
3. **Langlotz, A (2006)** Idiomatic Creativity, University of Basel, John Benjamins Publishing Company.
4. **Langlotz, A**. (1998). A Cognitive Semantic approach to contrastive phraseology – The
motivation of idioms by conceptual metaphors: A contrastive analysis of English and German idioms denoting mental fitness and weakness. Basel: Lizentiatsarbeit.

BDD-V4837 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:44 UTC)

4. **Langlotz, A.** (2001). Cognitive principles of idiom variation – idioms as complex linguistic
categories. Studi Italiani di Linguistica Teorica e Applicata, 2, 289–302..
5. **Langlotz, A**. (2004). What are metaphors? In D. J. Allerton, N. Nesselhauf, & P. Skandera
(Eds.), Phraseological units: Basic concepts and their application [ICSELL, 8] (pp. 37–51).
Basel: Schwabe.
6. **Langlotz, A**. (2005). Are constructions the basic units of grammar? – The phraseological
turn in linguistic theory. In A. Hamm (Ed.), Language chunks and linguistic units
[RANAM38] (pp. 45–63). Strasbourg: UniversitéMarc Bloch, Services des périodique
7. **Palmer, F. R.** (1981). Semantics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. **Sinclair, J.** (1991). Corpus, concordance, collocation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BDD-V4837 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:44 UTC)