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# DEFORMATION OF IDIOMS ON THE STRUCTURAL LEVEL

Idioms have always been 'a pain in the neck' for linguists trying to account for everyday language behavior when it is used in its basic function - a means of communication. In spite of the fact that structurally idioms are polylexemic compositions and have a formal identity with the syntactic pattern of a free combination of words, semantically they have long been viewed as indivisible units of meaning. However, the recent research has proved that linguists have their intuitions about the semantic analysability of idioms which play an important role in determining their syntactic productivity and lexical flexibility. The actual usage of idioms in speech is not conditioned by arbitrary rules which are a matter of convention but are often 'motivated by people's understanding of the conceptual structures underlying idioms. In contemporary linguistics this kind of idiom usage is variously designated as 'nonce variation', 'deliberate transformation', 'occasional use' or 'deformation' and is usually regarded as something made for the nonce, as a linguostylistic device aimed at enhancing the expressivity of speech. From this point of view idioms present a threefold unity of the semantic, structural and functional invariants being in the state of uneven balance with one of them playing the leading role.

According to the traditional theory of idiomaticity idioms are seen as 'dead metaphors' - 'the end point of the process of idiomatisation, by which word combinations first establish themselves through constant reuse, then undergo figurative extension and finally petrify [1]. The metaphoric nature of an idiom accounts for its idiomaticity which is understood as the unpredictability of the meaning of the whole from the literal meanings of the constituent parts. The common assumption, then, is that in spite of the fact that structurally idioms are polylexemic compositions and have a formal identity with the syntactic pattern of a free combination of words, semantically they are isolated and present one unit of meaning which is roughly equivalent to simple literal paraphrases as the following ones drawn from "Catcher in the Rye":

1.feel like sth/doing sth - to think that one would like (to do/have) sth;

2.to want (to do) sth, not to care/give a damn (about sth/sb) - not to care at all, take a hint - to understand and do what has been indirectly suggested;

3. let sb/sth drop - to do or say nothing more about sth/sb.

Another very important feature of an idiom is its syntactic stability which is demonstrated by a specially designed set of syntagmatic and paradigmatic tests aimed at specifying the restrictions in the syntactic behaviour of idioms as opposed to non-idiomatic word sequences. For example, substitution test is called upon to show the impossibility of replacing a component of an idiom by another word without destroying its idiomatic meaning unless it is the case of normal accepted variation: to spend a king's ransom - and not to spend a queen's redemption, For God's/goodness '/Heaven's, etc. sake. There are other tests which are meant to show that adding of new components, the elimination of the necessary ones or the change of their order within an idiomatic phrase are impossible and may result in an ordinary syntactic structure.



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Restrictions to syntagmatic changes go hand in hand with paradigmatic limitations, i.e. the deformational deficiency of idioms which block the use of idiom constituents as normal, regular lexical units. Thus, the deformational deficiency of an idiom may consist in blocking passive deformation (hit the ceiling does not allow the passive construction the ceiling is hit or in the case of keep tabs on sb tabs are kept on sb would be valid variant) or blocking nominalization deformation (to play a waiting game - a playing of a waiting game, to kick the bucket - His kicking (of) the bucket was quite unexpected).

For some idioms deformation presupposes an entire replacement of the components with its structural pattern remaining the same. Phrases 'girls will be girls', 'students will be students' follow the structural model characteristic of the original idiom ('boys will be boys') which makes it possible to relate them to it. The numerous contextual realisations of the sentence idiom 'one man's meat is another man's poison [1] show how the phrase could be adapted to express the speaker's meaning: 'one man's rubbish is another man's treasure', 'one man's superstition is another man's religion', 'one woman's ideal husband is another woman's pain in the neck [1], etc. All these deformations are made up in accordance with the structure of the idiom which is not altered regardless the fact that some additional components are embedded in it. As for the content of these phrases they all, as Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English states, contain 'the same comment on the variability of human judgement or taste'. According to the same dictionary the favourable and unfavourable nouns may be reversed. It should be noted that the changes of the structural invariant of an idiom is often accompanied by a certain shift in its functional orientation which in contrast with that of the original one in contemporary English may imply a humorous or facetious use.

However, it has always been felt, especially by Russian linguists, that the contradiction between the semantic integrity of the whole and formal independence of its parts, which is the basic characteristic of all idioms, cannot but influence their discourse peculiarities. Smirnitsky A.I. pointed out that although the structural separability of the constituents of an idiom is purely formal and they cannot be regarded as words of full value there is every reason to believe that they remain 'potential' words'.

The idioms are believed to be very well-known to all speakers of English who can easily establish the necessary links between them which eventually ensures the proper apprehension of the text.

Discourse realizations of the idiom 'a/the skeleton in the cupboard' (the American variant - 'a/the skeleton in the closet'} also show how the linguistic convention may give a new semantically independent status to a former component of an idiom. The majority of contemporary uses of this idiom are the result of the restructuring of its components deliberately made by the user of the language:

> Michael, it will be seen, had remained quite ignorant of the **skeleton in Soames' cupboard** (J. Galsworthy, *Swan Song*).

> It was **the skeleton in his house** and the family walked by it in terror and silence (W. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*).

These examples clearly demonstrate that speakers manipulate the components of the idiom 'skeleton' and 'cupboard' rather than the phrase itself arranging them at their will within a sentence in different ways with the words 'skeleton' and 'cupboard' standing out as the key words which constitute the idiomatic meaning of the idiom. 'Skeleton' is used to refer to the idea of something of which somebody is ashamed and which is kept secret, while



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'cupboard' is a metaphoric reference to the possible place the secret is being kept. The fact that the word 'cupboard' in the last example is replaced by the word 'house' which, broadly speaking, might be regarded as its metaphoric synonym does not hamper the understanding of the meaning implied.

Discourse realizations of the idiom 'ride for a fall' show how the linguistic convention may give a new semantically independent status to a former component of an idiom. The majority of contemporary uses of this idiom are the result of the restructuring of its components deliberately made by the user of the language:

*I have feeling* that you **'re riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall.**

**This fall** *I think* **you're riding for - is a special kind of fall, a horrible kind.**

These examples clearly demonstrate that speakers manipulate the components of the idiom 'fall' rather than the phrase itself arranging them at their will within a sentence in different ways with the words 'fall' and 'ride' standing out as the key words which constitute the idiomatic meaning of the idiom. 'Fall' is used to refer to a risky act which makes disaster likely.

Recent linguistic and psycholinguistic research in the field has experimentally proved that speakers have their intuitions about the semantic analysability of idioms. Speakers are claimed to be aware of the fact that 'spill the beans' is semantically analysable because 'beans' is processed by the speaker as 'an idea' or 'secret' and 'spill' - as 'the act of revealing the secret'. The compositional character of metaphoric structure of idioms play an important role in the process of decoding and encoding (listening and speaking) activities as well as the speaker's judgement of the appropriate and effective contextual realisations. It is the people's awareness of the systematic contribution idiomatic components as individual lexemes make to the overall figurative interpretation of idioms that determines, in actual fact, their discourse variability, productivity and effective use [2].

Data that have been given above also show that it is the speaker's ability to perform the compositional analysis of the meaning of the idiom strings that makes such uses of the idiom possible.

Being the products of the linguistic activity of the speech community in question the given contextual realizations as, for example, of the idiom 'hit the sack" or 'hit the hay' meaning 'to go to bed' may be regarded as its variant uses because the both variants retain the basic semantic concept of the word 'bed'.

The same holds for many English idioms that have two or more concept words in their structure and whose inner form, or metaphoric foundation, is fairly transparent. For example:

**'To kill two birds with one stone'**

A patient language method, like a patient medicine claims to prevent or to cure all possible ills (linguistic or physical, as the case may be) by repeated application of one special device or drug; both of them claim **to kill innumerable birds with one stone.**
We have occasion to note that the principle suggests the inadvisability **of killing too many birds with one stone.** The principle goes farther and to the figure of speech just quoted adds the two following corollaries, viz.: **'Find the right stone to kill the right bird', and 'It is often advisable to kill one bird with more than one stone'.** There are many different ways of teaching a different sound, there are many ways of teaching a difficult point in grammar, a curious form or construction, or of causing the student to discriminate two things which ought not to be confused [H. Palmer, *The Principles of Language Study*].



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**'a square peg in a round hole'**

Poor little snipe - **a square peg in a round hole** wherever he might be; and all those **other pegs** - thousands upon thousands, that would never fit in (J. Galsworthy, *The Silver Spoon*).
Sometimes, lately, I've begun to doubt whether we shall ever find a proper place for Basil. He's been **a square peg in so many round holes** (E. Waugh, *Put out More Flags*).

**'to keep one's nose to the grindstone'**

'If we want you, I suppose we can always find you here'. - 'Always', - said Mr. Bently sweetly. - *7* often whimsically refer to this little table as **my grindstone. I keep my nose to it'** (E. Waugh, *Put out More Flags*).
'If I didn 't **keep Jerry sweet Irish nose right down to the grindstone** he 'd be running around with some other girl' (F. Hurst, *Appasionata*)

**'like looking/searching for a needle in a haystack'**

/.../ Oh well, that's **like looking for needles in haystacks...** Well, who has a life to spend detecting **that kind of needle in that kind of haystack?** (Paul Scott, *The Jewel in the Crown*).

**'to skate on thin ice'**

David took an inward breath and **skated hastily over thin ice;** explaining about Beth, her sharing his studio at home /.../ (J. Fowles, The Ebony Tower). I think in real relationships people are rude to each other. They know it's safe, **they're not walking on ice** (J. Fowles, *The Enigma*).

**'to pull one's leg'**

You 're trying **to pull the old leg again.** Whoever heard of a party in a captive balloon? (E. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*).
**Pull the other leg** next time, will you. I should hate to have one longer than the other (W.S. Maugham, *The Circle*).
If you **go on pulling my leg** so persistently I shall be permanently deformed (W.S. Maugham, *The Constant Wife*).

**'to know which side one's bread is buttered'**

The vicar of Lyme at that time was a comparatively emancipated man theologically, but he also **knew very well on which side his pastoral bread was buttered** (J. Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*).
'Walton **knows which side his bread is buttered.**' -

'What extraordinary expressions we do use. It's hard to imagine that any man has failed **to know which side his piece of bread is buttered'** (A. Wilson, *As if by Magic*).

**'make a mountain out of a molehill'**

**'You are making a frightening mountain out of an absurd little molehill' - 'Of** course, but **the mountain I'm making in my imagination** is so frightening that I'd rather try to forget both it and **the repulsive little molehill** that gave it birth (T. Rattigan , *The Browning Version*).
With one bound he had leaped from the tradition of his class and type, which was **to see molehills as mountains and mountains themselves** as mere menacing blur on the horizon: and now, even **the mountains** had come closer and revealed that easy and well trodden paths led to their heights; even, it seemed, to their glittering snow-crowned summits (J. Wain, *Hurry on Down*).

**'to have a finger in the / every pie'**



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I had felt the brush take life in my hand that afternoon; **I had had my finger in the great succulent pie of creation.** I was a man of the Renaissance that evening – of Browning's renaissance (E. Waugh, *Brides Head Revisited*).

**The devil** speed him, no man's pie is freed from his ambitious finger// (W. Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*).

**'put all one's eggs in/into one basket'**

I've put a lot of money, a damned lot of money for me, into this last floatation. It is sound, isn't it?... It must seem odd my asking you like this, but I've **never put so many eggs into one basket** (Gr. Green, *England Made me*).

Well, go ahead if you want to. But you 'II get all your thanks **in one** basket from the good-for-nothing crowd that hangs out here (A. Cronin, *Keys*).

**'take the guilt off the gingerbread'**

/.../ 'From what Margot tells me the last war was absolute heaven. Alastair wants to go for a soldier.' - 'Conscription **has rather taken the gilt off that particular gingerbread',** said Basil. 'Besides, this ain't going to be a soldier's war' (E. Waugh, *Put out More Flags*).

'Good bye', I said, feeling a little puzzled. **Some of the gilt had already been taken off the gingerbread.** Why should she panic when mother came into the room? It was as if she hadn't wanted it to be known that she was going out with me (J. Brain, *Room at the Top*).

Well, Sir, we're not much to speak of out here after a year and a half. I consider there's **too much gilt on the gingerbread** as regards Australia (J. Galsworthy, *The Silver Spoon*).

In contemporary linguistics this kind of idiom usage is variously designated as '*nonce variation*' (A.Cowie), '*deliberate transformation*' (R.Glaser), '*occasional use*', '*deformation*', etc. and is usually regarded as something made for the nonce, as a linguistylistic device aimed at enhancing the expressivity of speech. At the same time, it is enough to throw a cursory glance at the variety of contextual realisations of idioms to see that nonce-variation is a much more pervasive phenomenon than it is believed to be. Variation of this kind is so widespread that lexicographers, as we have seen, register it in dictionaries or simply admit the existence of such possibilities by giving the restructured variants of an idiom as an illustration of its use. However, we still know very little about its mechanics, what types of idioms tend to be inclined to such variation, whether it is systematic or random and what factors, linguistic and extralinguistic, are involved in this process.

Variation of idioms has traditionally been approached statically and regarded as part of the problem 'same'/'different'. The range of possible changes in the structure and lexical components of the idiom has been tested from the point of view of the semantic changes, or its desintegration, they may lead to. Dictionaries of idioms provide ample evidence of normal, institutionalised variation that is always characteristically limited. The static view of idioms stems from the fact that for a very long time linguists have been primarily concerned with the semantic and syntactic properties of idioms as part of the lexicon neglecting the dynamic aspect of the problem, i.e. the functional-communicative peculiarities idioms demonstrate in various discourse situations.

In contrast with words idioms are much more involved in the dynamic processes of language development and tend to vary to a much greater extent beyond the limits set by the accepted institutionalised variation. The distinctive properties of their semantics which are characterised by what linguists describe now as 'semantic diffusion' enable the speaker to extend the idiom to as many situations as 'its metaphoric power permits' [3].



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To demonstrate the adaptable quality of the semantics of an idiom I would like to draw the following examples from the work by J.D. Salinger in question to illustrate how the idiom 'big deal could be stretched to different situations wherever it is appropriate to speak about a somehow grand undertaking or event:

*(9) The game with Saxon Hall was* supposed to be a very big deal *around Pencey.*

*(10)All these angels start coming out of the boxes and everywhere, ..* ..Big deal.

The specific nature of the contextual realisation of the idiom in the second example is rendered by encoding in it an ironical tone (Big deal=['m not impressed). Variation being the totality of dynamic states of an idiom can be better understood if approached from the tipological point of view, i.e. in terms of invariant/ variation which R. Jakobson believed to be the key problem of contemporary linguistics.

The term 'tipology' was first used by R. Jacobson [4] with reference to the fact of language as a result of his keen interest in the problems of the invariant / variation relationship. As far as idioms are concerned the invariant idea of an idiom presents a threefold unity of the semantic, structural and functional invariants being in the state of uneven balance with one of them playing the leading role. The examples that follow show that in spite of the fact that the structure of the idiom is broken they can be brought together due to the line of thinking they all share.

Analysis of the idioms discussed demonstrates that the structural invariant of the idioms which conditions their framework has become less firm and admits the reshuffling of the components. However, deformation of this kind is possible only provided that the speaker makes use of the concept words of the idiom referring to its invariant meaning which has not altered.

Besides the language factors which make this kind of uses possible for a certain type of idioms the spread of deformation of this type can be explained by a number of extralinguistic factors. I have already mentioned that idioms are often referred to as dead or petrified metaphors. In contrast with the individual metaphor created by the speaker for a particular situation idioms are lexicalised metaphors. The stereotyped characteristic of dead metaphors which have lost their metaphoricity in the course of time is the reason why many educated speakers of English regard them as cliches - banal, hackneyed phrases to be either avoided or refashioned. This attitude towards many idioms in the English language especially the ones which enter into the core of the idiomatic stock and are often referred to as 'dead English' determines the linguocultural pattern of their use and is one of the extralinguistic reasons of the pervasiveness of variation of idiom cliches as well as proverbs.

To sum up, the features that idioms reveal in contextual realisations are the result of the deformation of the semantic, structural and functional invariants which are historically conditioned.

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**ABSTRACT**
*In this article I have mentioned that idioms are often referred to as dead or petrified metaphors. In contrast with the individual metaphor created by the speaker for a particular situation idioms are lexicalised metaphors. The stereotyped characteristic of dead metaphors which have lost their metaphoricity in the course of time is the reason why many educated speakers of English regard them as cliches - banal, hackneyed phrases to be either avoided or refashioned. This attitude towards many idioms in the English language especially the ones which enter into the core of the idiomatic stock and are often referred to as 'dead English' determines the linguocultural pattern of their use and is one of the extralinguistic reasons of the pervasiveness of variation of idiom cliches as well as proverbs.*



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