SOME REFLEXIONS ON THE STUDY OF IDIOMS AND CONSEQUENCES FOR L2 TEACHING

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I. INTRODUCTION

Given the importance of figurative language not only in L1 but also in L2, this paper will centre on a particular manifestation of such figurative language: the idiomatic phrase. The purpose is to examine the study of fixed expressions, the difficulties they pose and the theorists' main concerns. I will then offer a comparison of the situation in L1 with the circumstances which surround L2 learning, and an exploration of how the differences affect L2 idiom teaching.

The method chosen has an interdisciplinary orientation. Since a fundamental aspect of these phrases is that they lend themselves to both a literal and an idiomatic interpretation, the disciplines involved in their study should necessarily be linguistics (idioms are made up of words, thus they are linguistic expressions, and part of the lexicon) and also psycholinguistics (a point of view on how to parse the various readings).

As a sample of how the teaching of idioms is done in practice, three textbooks of Proficiency level (Bywater 1985, Jones 1993, Gude and Duckworth 1997) have been submitted to examination.

The paper is organized as follows: it begins in section II with what is a thorny question in any study of idioms, i.e. their definition. Here I try to show how the theoretical confusion is transferred to textbooks where "idiom" is used as a coverterm for a variety of disparate expressions. The third section covers the theoretical perspectives on the study of idioms from a linguistic and a psycholinguistic viewpoint. Towards the end I try to relate the two approaches reflecting on those aspects which are common to both.

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Finally, the fourth section deals with idioms in L2. The initial part contrasts the situation in L1 and L2, placing emphasis on those characteristics which apply to L2 learners. Then there follows an analysis of the three textbooks, designed to throw light on the strategies used in idiom teaching.

II. THE PROBLEM OF THE DEFINITION

At the outset, a study of idioms is likely to run into two main difficulties: the terminology involved and the delimitation of the concept.

In identifying the items, a large diversity of names have been used. These range from the more familiar "formulas", "chunks" or "fixed expressions", to the more sophisticated "prefabricated" or "ready-made language", "unanalyzed language", etc. A quick look at these various labels soon reveals a widely held belief among researchers: that idioms are multiword combinations whose meaning cannot be derived from the constituent parts. This statement (which will be examined later on) leads directly to the second aspect mentioned above, that is, the difficulty encountered by scholars when it comes to delimiting the nature of the concept.

Nunberg et al. (1994) remark on the laxity with which the term "idiom" is used. Thus, whereas some authors use it only for truly noncompositional expressions, learners' dictionaries employ "idiom" as a coverterm even for those collocations with fully literal senses.

In fact there exist definitions available to suit all tastes. Some of them are too permissive, such as McCarthy's (1992: 55):

> By idioms I mean strings of more than one word whose syntactic form is to a greater or lesser degree fixed and whose semantics is opaque, also to a greater or lesser degree. This definition (...) enables us to incorporate within the term "idiom" a wide range of fixed expressions, including the *tournure* idioms (...), phrasal verbs, a variety of other formal types, cultural allusions, restricted collocations and extended metaphors.

The author establishes criteria of membership around the following operations: addition, deletion, transposition and substitution. Fixed expressions do not freely allow for such manipulation and therefore can be regarded as idioms.

Equally permissive is Kövecses and Szabó's (1996) classification of idioms. These authors admit that the category of idioms is a "mixed bag" where one can find metaphors, metonymies, pairs of words, idioms with *it*, similes, sayings, phrasal verbs and grammatical idioms.

At the other extreme, authors such as Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994), while acknowledging that idiom is "a fuzzy category", maintain that these items can be identified by properties such as conventionality, inflexibility, figuration, proverbiality, informality and affect. These scholars maintain that none of these properties apply obligatorily to all idioms. Nonetheless, some of them (figuration, proverbial character, association with popular speech and - above all - conventionality) are regarded as essential, to such an extent that if several of them are missing, we become increasingly relunctant to call the expression an idiom.

Hickey (1993) makes an advance in the identification of formulas (distinguishing between conditions that are necessary, graded and typical). However, he does not solve the problem of the definition.

As might be expected, the theoretical confusion which surrounds the characterisation of idioms has its bearing on the practical side. Thus, our examination of coursebooks for English learners has revealed that authors tend to include under the term "idiom" a mixture of phrasal verbs, compounds, collocations, sayings and fixed phrases of various types.

Of the three textbooks examined, it is Bywater (1985) who maintains the strictest division. Thus, for instance phrasal verbs or similes generally appear in exercises specially devoted to these items. Nevertheless, this policy is due more to the overall organization of the book (each section tackles different points of English grammar) than to any underlying sound theoretical arguments concerning the definition of "idioms". This impression is strengthened by finding exercises where students are asked to supply the right verbs in order to produce expressions like (1) or (2):

> (1) put/set the room to rights, take someone to task, throw in one's lot, keep open house, to feather one's own nest, fall short of one's expectations, to give someone the slip, to lead someone a dance, to turn to good account

> (2) to pay compliments, to go bankrupt, to owe someone an apology, to make someone's acquaintance, to have/exert an influence over people, to come to a decision, to boost one's ego, to appeal to someone's feelings

The same is true of exercises where the student has to fill a gap (which I have made correspond with the underlined word) to yield phrases such as (3) or (4):

(3) to have a <u>chip</u> on one's shoulder, <u>safe</u> and sound, to be <u>tarred</u> with the same brush, to go against the <u>grain</u>

(4) a <u>slight</u> acquaintance, to <u>stand</u> a round of drinks, <u>slapstick</u> comedies, to live in the <u>lap</u> of luxury, to have a <u>raw</u> deal in life, a <u>raw</u> recruit, a <u>live</u> wire, <u>creature</u> comforts, a <u>nice</u> distinction, to take an <u>overdose</u> of pills, a <u>towering</u> rage

Other exercises include under the term "expression" phrases of such a varied nature as those in (5a) and (5b):

(5) a. to say off-hand, to take the wind out of someone's sails, to live from hand to mouth, to make head or tail of something

b. cupboard love, eyesore

It can then be observed that Bywater is not interested in drawing a distinction between collocations or compounds, to be found in (2), (4) or (5b), and fixed phrases which are to be found in (1), (3) or (5a). Moreover, from the formulation of exercise headings, it might be concluded that the author's system is arbitrary. Hence one wonders about the motivation in deciding that in *fall short of one's expectations* the item to be tested is *fall* and not *short*, or *expectations* for that matter, just as in *to go against the grain*, students are asked to find the correct noun instead of the verb.

I am afraid that there is no logical answer to this question, since most probably the only principle at work was that of offering a certain variety in a type of exercise whose aim was to make students aware of the existence of frozen combinations.

Jones's (1993) coursebook shows a much less rigid division between phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions. The underlying strategy is to group two verbs in each exercise and to exploit possible combinations with particles or prepositions as well as with other parts of speech. Thus the student will find together examples such as those in (6):

(6) a. to keep up with someone, to hold up, to keep something to oneself, to keep one's fingers crossed, to hold the line, to hold back, to keep down

b. to come to terms with something, to go to one's head, to come along, to go ahead, to come of age

c. to bring something home, to get round a problem, to bring out the worst in someone, to get behind with something, to bring about something

d. to put one's foot in it, to put paid, to set up something, to put all one's eggs in one basket, to set something back

e. to take someone out, to take the rough with the smooth, to give oneself away, to give over to, to take offence, to give someone a lift

In view of the title of certain exercises (e.g. "collocations"), it might be thought that the author was trying to make learners aware of a terminological distinction between collocations and other types of fixed expressions. But after reading the introduction to the exercise, the supposed distinction turns out to be a mere label:

In some fixed, idiomatic phrases words go together like "salt and pepper", "fish and chips", "sweet and sour", or "Marks and Spencer" (Jones 1993: 169)

This quotation shows that Jones does not make any technical distinction between collocations and idioms. What is more, he fails to tackle the question of a unified meaning. In the examples he mentions, the common feature is not the meaning since "salt" continues to mean the same when it occurs alone or in the coordinated form with "pepper". The point of interest is the place that each item occupies within the coordinated phrase. It is odd that Jones should fail to make such a simple observation while thinking it worthwhile to include such items under the heading of an idiomaticity of dubious nature.

Gude and Duckworth's (1997) textbook does not clarify matters much further. It is true that these authors adopt a more cautious attitude in that they usually head their exercises with the neutral term "expressions". In this way, they avoid classifying phrases as fixed expressions, collocations, phrasal

verbs, etc. One consequence of this is that the student will come across the following items, all within the same exercise:

(7) come in for something, come round, come to the point, come down with something, come to terms with something

(8) do wonders for, do the donkey work, do time, do something up, do someone a good turn/favour

(9) child's play, foul play, play havoc with, play down, play with fire, play it by ear, play along with

But it may also happen that fixed phrases that are regarded as idiomatic be simply identified as "expressions". This is illustrated by:

(10)   to throw the book at someone, to turn over a new leaf, to do something by the book, to speak volumes about someone

Yet, elsewhere, the general heading "expressions" is followed by the word "idiom". In these cases the student can find examples such as:

(11)   a storm in a teacup, make heavy weather of, bright and breezy, under a cloud

(12)   take pot luck, take something amiss, take one's pick, take someone down a peg or two, take its toll

(13)   read between the lines, not to mince words, lost for words, in a word

It is not hard to see that Gude and Duckworth were not concerned with drawing neat distinctions between different types of fixed phrases. Yet, the fact that they sometimes fluctuate between the simple term "expression" and the more technical form "idiom" may cause students to be at a loss and to wonder what differentiates some of the expressions in (7), (8), (9) and (10) from the assumed idioms in (11), (12) and (13).

Given the position adopted by theoreticians and coursebook writers with respect to the definition and use of the notion "idiom", teachers should guide and warn students about the difficulties of delimiting the concept. In view of the situation depicted, I consider it most advisable to maintain a broad approach to the term "idiom", for purposes of the present paper.

The next step is to examine the treatment of idioms from a twofold perspective: the theoretical perspective and the psycholinguistic one.

III. THE UNDERSTANDING AND PROCESSING OF IDIOMS IN L1

The study of idioms shows a curious range of interests among scholars. Miura (1996: 659) has noted that lexical/semantic ambiguity has for long attracted psycholinguists; since some idioms admit a literal reading as well as its supposed inherent figurative one, it does not come as a surprise that psycholinguistic researchers find in idiomatic expressions a suitable domain to contrast their theories.

Similarly, linguists have focused their interest on phrases which do not admit free movement, which present varied degrees of frozenness or which challenge the organization of a lexicon as simply conceived of single lexical units, to mention but a few of their concerns.

Hence it is my belief that the study of idioms is indissolubly linked to these two perspectives: the linguistic perspective and the psycholinguistic one. A major drawback in this interdisciplinary view, however, is that linguists seem to show little, if any, inclination for the work being done on parsing methodology, and psycholinguists do not appear to be willing to rely heavily on linguistic theory, thus becoming more psychologists than linguists.

This section of the paper will try to relate the two perspectives and enhance those aspects that are common to them. Doubtlessly, a question that has preoccupied linguists and psychologists alike is that of the meaning of the idiom. In what follows, this issue will be focused on from the two above mentioned perspectives.

III.1 THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF IDIOMS

When it comes to explaining the conceptualization of idioms from the point of view of theoretical linguistics, two approaches can be distinguished. On the one hand, we find the traditional approach (as labelled by Keysar and Bly 1995; Kövecses and Szabó 1996), according to which idioms are arbitrary

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expressions whose meaning is unmotivated. This claim is maintained, among others (Chomsky 1981, 1995; Cruse 1986; Jackendoff 1997), by Dik's Functional Grammar (1988) (henceforth FG).

This traditional view has been attacked by those scholars who defend a non-arbitrary treatment of idioms. Nunberg et al. (1994: 496), for example, devote part of their paper to criticizing the association of each idiom with a single semantic representation:

> To justify this claim (...) it has to be shown not just that the meaning of the idiom could not be predicted on the basis of a knowledge of the meanings of its parts, but that once the meaning of the idiom is known (...) it cannot be devolved on the constituents of the expression.

Those who agree with the opinions expressed in this quotation can be grouped mainly under the Cognitive Semantics school. It may be pointed out that recent studies (Titone and Connine 1999) hold a hybrid attitude towards the nature of fixed expressions, thus advocating a model which supports non-compositional and compositional approaches to idiom representation.

In order to see the differences, we will firstly deal with the treatment of idiomatic meanings in the traditional approach and then move on to the cognitivist approach.

Dik's (1988) Functional Grammar claims that idiomatic phrases are stored in the lexicon through a predicate frame which is associated with a meaning definition. This predicate frame has the property of containing some lexically filled slots (those which belong to the frozen part of the expression). The grammar must be provided with a device whose function is to signal that an idiom is involved; in this respect Dik (1988: 5) points out that a general convention may suffice: when a combination of lexical items is defined in terms of a single predicate, then we have an idiom.

As Moutaouakil (1997: 87) observes, and Dik himself (1988: 17) admits, the previous account explains frozen idioms very well, but takes no account of those where both the literal and the idiomatic meanings are relevant. Moutaouakil calls de-idiomatization the process through which an idiom loses all (complete de-idiomatization) or some (semi-de-idiomatization) of its idiomatic features. The context may suffice to trigger such a process: the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression can be revived when the speaker inserts a lexical item (a modifier, for example) which is appropriate to this meaning.

As illustrated by Dik (1988:17-18) and Moutaouakil (1997: 88), this is what happens in (14), where *bloody* in (14a) and *stone-blind* in (14b) relate to the literal meaning of these sentences rather than to their idiomatic meaning.

(14)   a. They finally buried the bloody hatchet.

         b. That certainly was a stone-blind date.

To Moutaouakil, the hybrid status shown by these expressions is worth commenting on since the process is highly productive, it is probably attested in all natural languages and the coexistence of both meanings is an instance of ambiguity. As mentioned before this ambiguity is not accidental, rather it is the result of the speaker's discursive strategies.

Of great interest to the present paper are Moutaouakil's (1997: 89) reflexions upon the simultaneous relevance of both meanings:

i) The idiomatic meaning: it is not to be inferred through some logical reasoning, but it is an inherent semantic feature of the expression.

ii) The literal meaning: once revived, it regains its original properties as a basic part of the semantic content.

The two meanings are basic parts of the inherent semantic content of the de-idiomatised idiom but neither of them can be conceived of as derived from the other by an inferential mechanism.

This author suggests a procedure to account for the de-idiomatised constructions within FG: provided that the clause structure for the literal meaning is similar to the clause structure for the idiomatic meaning (except in the predicate frame they contain), the two clause structures would be collapsed into a single one with two predicate frames inserted in the same predication. On the criterion of economy, this solution is to be preferred to one which codes the two meanings in two distinct, although related, underlying clause structures.

Recently, however, theorists have shifted from viewing idioms as strictly linguistic entities to viewing them in terms of conceptual processes. The traditional approach to the nature of idioms has been challenged by such figures as Lakoff, Langacker and Johnson (see especially Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Lakoff and his colleagues have proposed not only a model of figurative language, but rather a conception of human thought and reasoning that is intended as a fundamental reformulation of current linguistic and cognitive theory. This new approach has come to be known as "cognitive linguistics". The breadth of Lakoff's proposal is beyond the scope of this paper. Here we are only concerned with aspects of the proposal that have to do with the conceptual bases for idiomatic expressions.

Central to the reaction against the idiomatic account is the belief in people's intuition that many idioms make sense. Speakers presumably make sense of idioms by learning arbitrary links between these phrases and their figurative meanings. The conceptual system (Lakoff 1993; Kövecses and Szabó 1996) bridges two domains of knowledge. One is a familiar, physical domain called a source domain; the second is a less familiar, abstract domain called a target domain. The source domain is applied to provide understanding of the target.

These researchers consider idioms to be highly motivated. The individual words in many fixed phrases systematically contribute to the overall figurative interpretations. The cognitive approach does not focus on idioms that are opaque, but considers the large class of idioms that are relatively transparent, like *to skate on thin ice*. Gibbs (1994: 425) suggests that people normally attempt to do some compositional analysis when understanding idiomatic expressions. This does not necessarily mean, however, that people automatically compute the literal interpretations of idioms, but rather that some compositional process attempts to assign some figurative meanings to the individual components in idioms in the process of understanding.

The motivation of idiomatic phrases works well with transparent idioms, but what about those that are opaque? Cacciari and Glucksberg (1994), among others, admit that not everything is metaphorical. As a solution to this problem Nunberg et al. (1994) draw a terminological distinction between idioms: "idiomatically combining expressions", "idiomatic combinations" for short, comprise those phrases which are decomposable, whereas the term "idiomatic phrases" refers to those idioms that have to be understood as a whole chunk. From this perspective, the difference between an idiom and its literal paraphrase stems from the absence of motivation of the same set of conceptual metaphors that give rise to the fixed phrase.

Needless to say, the claims of Lakoff and his colleagues have not gone unchallenged. Quinn's (1991) and Cacciari and Glucksberg's (1994) critique concerns the development and nature of conceptual knowledge. One important issue refers to the availability of the conceptual structures hypothesized. A conceptual structure may be available in semantic theory yet may not be accessed for either production or comprehension. The second problem revolves around the universality of the conceptual mappings that the theory proposes, that is, whether everybody has a systematic set of mappings from the source domain to the target domain. If the theory works, this conceptual structure should be shared by every speech community.

Moreover, Keysar and Bly (1999) are quite critical of cognitive linguistics. In their paper, they claim that idioms cannot, in principle, be

used to argue for the existence of conceptual structures. To these authors, the reasons for the perceived transparency may have less to do with conceptual motivation than with the nature of interpretive strategies.

III.2 THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC DIMENSION

Just as theoretical linguists substantiate different claims on the understanding of fixed phrases, so the study of idiom processing makes it possible to differentiate three opposing approaches.

Schweigert and Moates (1988) lend support to what they themselves called the Idiomatic Processing Model. According to this view, when an idiom is encountered it is first processed figuratively due to the strong conventional (figurative) meaning of the expression. Schraw et al. (1988) confirm these findings, adding that familiarity contributes to the strength of preferences for figurative interpretations.

Bobrow and Bell (1973) and Burbules et al. (1989) represent what is known as the Literal Processing Model, according to which, when an idiom is encountered it is first processed literally, but if that meaning is inappropriate for the context, an idiomatic processing mode is activated.

More recently, Schraw (1995) has replicated these findings in what he has called the Focus-Shifting Hypothesis (readers attempt to understand idioms literally, shifting to a figurative mode only when such attempts prove unproductive).

Gibbs (1994) and Cacciari and Glucksberg (1994) do not hesitate to attack a model that gives unconditional prominence to literal meanings, derived automatically and with little effort. Gibbs (1994: 421), who is mainly concerned with the economy criterion, emphasises that psycholinguistic experiments show that figurative expressions do not always require additional processing effort. Therefore, the "less effort" argument would lose strength in defence of a first literal interpretation.

In turn, Cacciari and Glucksberg (1994: 457) have serious difficulty in admitting a model that, firstly, implies a reasoned distinction between literal and non-literal meanings (an objection that also affects the Idiomatic Processing Model). The second drawback has to do with the absolute priority given to literal interpretations. On the one hand, they echo the idea that it is not at all clear that people always and unconditionally process sentences sufficiently to derive a literal interpretation. On the other hand, they are not willing to accept that figurative language be assigned the optionality status (i.e. to be considered only when the literal interpretation does not fit). This claim seems to have been disproved by research conducted in the early 80's (Glucksberg, Gildea and Bookin 1982; Gildea and Glucksberg 1983).

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It is true that Cacciari and Glucksberg assess the importance of literal meaning; they (1994: 457) observe that it may play an important role in the final interpretation of utterances and, consequently, that it may be used to guide and constrain the inferential comprehension process. But this does not amount to granting priority to the literal meaning. These authors put forward the idea that the optimal strategy would be to derive both meanings, in all utterances that allow them. As we will see shortly, this suggestion is close to our third approach to idiom processing.

Theoretical preferences aside, it is a fact that the literal view on idiom parsing does not have many supporters. The reason may be a simple one though: it offers a costly account (this model entails a three-stage strategy: literal interpretation; assessment and possible rejection; figurative interpretation) of what is otherwise a swift process.

The last psychological model of comprehension we are going to refer to is Swinney and Cutler's (1979) Simultaneous Processing Model. In their account both meanings of the idiom, the figurative and the literal, are processed at the same time. More recent research on this model (Forrester 1995) seems to favour the idea that idiomatic expressions are frozen by their history of use and recognizable conventionality, rather than being lexicalized representations "in the head".

The next section analyses features that are to a greater or lesser extent shared by the different perspectives.

III.3 BRIDGING LINGUISTIC AND PSYCHOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES

Having examined the conceptualization of idioms from theoretical perspectives as well as the various models in idiom comprehension, I would like to focus on the question of how a specific line of thought may have led to a parsing strategy.

In my opinion, the traditional model, according to which the interpretation of the idiom is non-compositional, would be equivalent to the Idiomatic Processing Model. Such a link is established on the bases of a strong association between the presence of a fixed phrase and a non-motivated idiomatic reading. Yet such an association is not referred to by the authors quoted above.

It is nevertheless true that Dik (1988: 18-21), when hinting at the possibility of a natural language parser after the Functional model, comments on the need to take into account contextual clues (and the difficulty involved in doing so)- clues that could help the human parser decide between a literal and an idiomatic reading, in much the same way as the information contained in a predicate frame easies the way to take this decision.

It seems productive to draw a parallel between the Simultaneous Processing Model and the cognitivist approach, invoking the motivation that cognitivist theorists find for fixed expressions; a motivation whose spirit is captured in Nunberg et al. (1994: 530):

> There is a good deal of recent work on metaphor that shows how the basic metaphorical schemas that underlie most transfer processes in natural language take familiar, concrete things and situations (e.g. the body, spatial relations) as the models for more abstract domains (social interactions, temporal and causal relations, and so on). So we would be surprised to find a language which had an idiom of the form *divulge the information* with the meaning *spill the soup*, as in *The waiter divulged the information all over my new suit.*

It makes sense to think that cognitive theorists associate the idiomatic expression with both the literal and the figurative meaning. As we have already seen, in Cacciari and Glucksberg's view, the literal reading guides and constrains the correct interpretation of the idiomatic expression, an insight that I have used to establish the relationship between this theoretical trend and the Simultaneous Processing Model of comprehension.

The opening part of this paper tried to alert the reader to the general lack of agreement which surrounds both the definition and the limits of an idiom. And as the theoretical characterization of such phrases was introduced, we became more and more aware that there are many different criteria on this issue. Part of the problem springs from the fact that each theoretical trend uses those expressions that best suit each particular goal. Thus, the traditional approach and the idiomatic model of comprehension are mainly concerned with opaque expressions, that is, those whose whole meaning is not simply the sum of its constituents. It is not then hard to understand why their main concerns are the arbitrariness and the priority of figurative interpretations.

On the other hand, the cognitive approaches and the Simultaneous Processing Model of parsing (even the Literal Processing Model could be included here) would rather do research on a corpus made up of transparent idioms, in such a way that the constituent elements are relatively salient.

This disappointing situation, which may easily lead to partial conclusions, acquires new and more solid bases when we examine the study of idioms in L2. This is the purpose of the following section.

IV. IDIOMS AND L2 LEARNERS

Formulaic language may play an important role in L2 development and this can surely be exploited in language teaching. Working on the belief that fixed expressions are a source of inspiration for vocabulary, the following aspects should be borne in mind: lexicalization in L2 and the learning strategy.

As to the former, comparisons are levelled with idiom processing in L1, where Broderick (1991) and Pearson (1990) suggested that children as young as three can comprehend figurative language, and that the accuracy of comprehension increases with the child's age. Schraw et al. (1988) carried out comparative studies on the level of lexicalization in L1 and L2. Their results indicate that native speakers are considerably more sensitive to lexicalization than nonnatives. The latter are more likely to use a word-by-word parsing strategy regardless of whether the expression is idiomatic or literal.

In view of these results, it could be said that the Literal Processing Model would be clearly favoured by L2 students. Recall that the importance of this model in L1 was considerably low.

With respect to the second point, the learning strategy, despite the fact that we find a lack of consensus over issues such as the conceptualization of the process by which vocabulary acquisition occurs, the importance of context use for acquiring vocabulary, and the extent to which students develop specific strategies for vocabulary learning during their language studies (see Weinert 1994; Lawson and Hogben 1996; Prince 1996, for various commentaries on these issues), in the case of idioms theorists appear to place emphasis on the importance of contextual clues (McCarthy 1992) and the type of phrases used. Thus according to Gairns and Redman (1986: 36), the learning and teaching of idioms should focus on those which are "useful" and can be incorporated naturally into the learner's productive vocabulary.

Incorporation into productive vocabulary is straightforward from a conceptual semantics point of view, as defended by Kövecses and Szabó (1996). As already explained, in this approach idiomatic expressions are not independent of any conceptual system and they are not isolated from each other at the conceptual level. The assumption that the meaning of idioms is conceptually motivated enables these scholars to explain that particular words (such as *hand* or *fire*, for instance) occur in a large number of idioms. These links among idioms are supposed to facilitate the teachability/learnability of these phrases (Irujo 1993).

Motivation (for the meaning of idioms) is a central point in this approach. The hypothesis these researchers (Irujo 1993; Kövecses and Szabó 1996) work on is that learners of English as a foreign language who have developed metaphorical competence will obtain better results in the understanding of fixed phrases than those who have not. The link between the idiomatic meaning and the literal words arises from knowledge of the cognitive mechanisms. One of them is conventional knowledge.

After having set out the most relevant issues on idioms in L2, as well as what seems to be the preferred theoretical paradigm, I would like to focus on the practical side of the matter. Hence, the next section will analyse the types of exercises learners are faced with; these have been extracted from the three coursebooks under examination.

IV.1 TACTICAL APPROACH TO IDIOMS IN TEXTBOOKS

Before moving on to an analysis of the various types of suggested exercises, it is important to remember the conclusion arrived at in the second section, namely, that the theoretical confusion which surrounds the definition of the term "idiom" has been transferred to textbooks, in such a way that textbook writers tend to group under the item "idiom" expressions ranging from idiomatic phrases to compounds, including phrasal verbs, similes, sayings, collocations.

Given the idiosyncratic meaning of such linguistic manifestations, authors (e.g. Bywater 1985; Jones 1993; Gude and Duckworth 1997) tend to consider them a good way of expanding students' vocabulary. This attitude will determine the layout and choice of exercises.

In the analysis of the treatment of idioms in coursebooks I am going to adopt a tripartite structure: firstly, how to group idioms; secondly, how to guide learners through meaning; thirdly, how to elicit answers in the learner. In what follows I will set out the type of strategy and activity associated with each question.

IV.1.1 HOW TO GROUP IDIOMS

In order to facilitate the learnability and subsequent memorization of idiomatic expressions, the most widely used strategy is to emphasise those features that idioms may have in common. These main features are as follows: lexical features, syntactic features and topic features.

According to lexical features, those phrases which contain the same lexical item will appear together. Thus, Gude and Duckworth (1997) place together expressions which share the element *come* (p. 3), *do* (p. 30), *tie* (p. 45), *run*, *look* and *catch* (p. 61), *take* (p. 91), *pick* (p. 147), or *make* (p. 175).

Jones (1993) goes a little further in that he usually chooses two words between which there is a certain relationship (similar meaning, opposite meaning, etc.). Hence, the resulting pairs take the form of: *keep/hold* (p. 35), *come/go* (p. 93), *bring/get* (p. 128), *put/set* (p. 161), *give/take* (p. 190), *good/bad* (p. 218), or the triple *mind/brain/word* (p. 257).

In the case of syntactic features, idioms are grouped according to the form they take. That is, they may exhibit coordination with the conjunction *and*, which will lead to expressions such as "bits and pieces", "fast and furious", "house and home", "spick and span", etc. (Bywater 1985: 13) or "far and away", "dead and alive", "long and short", "once and for all", etc. (Bywater 1985: 72).

Another syntactic characteristic is the presence of infinitive forms, *there* constructions or, exceptionally, a full phrase (e.g. "That argument doesn't hold water"), as happens in Bywater (1985: 182, 229, 236).

Finally, topic features. Idioms may relate to a given topic, a strategy which has been mainly used by Gude and Duckworth (1997). Thus they group idiomatic phrases connected to books (p. 23); weather (p. 38); reading and words (p. 107); fish, ducks and water (p.119); trade, buying and selling (p. 155); light and dark (p. 187).

By exploiting this method, textbook writers hope to make learners aware of the constituent elements of the idiomatic expression, a practice which seems in full agreement with conceptual semantics.

IV.1.2 HOW TO GUIDE LEARNERS THROUGH MEANING

Perhaps as a consequence of the attitude taken towards idiom grouping, authors tend to be very explicit about the possible motivation underlying the fixed phrase. By the same token, this implies that most of the expressions employed are transparent ones (a generalization, it is fair to say, which does not affect Bywater (1985), an author whose work is mainly characterised by a broad scope in matters of vocabulary; perhaps, judging by current standards, too broad a scope to ensure students' learnability and ultimate production).

Be it as it may, I would like to focus on three types of exercises which insistently appear in association with idioms. They are: matching expressions, paraphrasing exercises and contextualising exercises.

The traditional approach to matching expressions consists in providing students with two columns: one contains the idiomatic expressions, the other definitions. As the number of items in the latter coincides with those in the former, the learner does not find it too hard to link the items.

In the most common version of paraphrasing exercises, the italicised parts of a sentence have to be replaced by the appropriate idiom. Given that

idioms are grouped according to the common features just pointed out, the replacement items are purposefully restricted.

I have given the name of "contextualising exercises" to a type of activity which seeks to test ability in the understanding of idioms by placing the idiomatic expression in a sentence, in such a way that the elements of the sentence will contribute to clarifying the figurative interpretation of the fixed phrase. It is a tactic consistently exploited by Jones (1993). As an illustration, observe the following examples:

(15)   a. I'm sorry for what I did, I hope you won't *hold it against* me. (p. 35)

            b. They explained what happened, but I feel they were *holding something back.* (p. 35)

(16)   a. I've read the report through twice, but I can't *make out* what he's getting at. (p. 64)

            b. Adrift alone in the ocean, they knew they were *done   for.* (p. 64)

            c. Shh, don't *make a scene* -we can talk about it when we get home. (p. 64)

(17)   a. Having the car fixed *set* me *back* $250! That's *put paid* to my holiday plans. (p. 161)

            b. You've let her get away with being late too often: its time you *put your foot down.* (p. 161)

As can be noticed, the idiomatic (supposedly unknown) expression is usually preceded by information which makes it possible for the learner to guess the answer. This kind of biased context is extremely helpful and at the same time plays an important part in justifying the figurative reading of the expression.

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IV.1.3 HOW TO ELICIT ANSWERS IN THE LEARNER

The student's own production is the highest step in the learning process. As a result, the type of activities oriented to developing this skill tend to come last in the series of activities involved in teaching idioms.

The ideas behind the exercises considered in this section so far outlined, are designed to enhance L2 learners' creative use of language as well as their fluency, two features which undoubtedly characterise the mastery of a language. The tests designed to encourage student autonomy are: gap-filling, writing and story-telling.

Gap-filling exercises require students to fill in a gap, which in the present circumstances represents part of an idiomatic form. Since the learner has just met a number of expressions, its immediate goal is to test his memory. Alternatively, when the contextual clues are poor, the number of options is high and students are asked to provide the full idiom. This latter variety represents a more demanding exercise, which is compensated with the exact number of gaps needed (Bywater 1985: 173-174).

As far the writing exercises are concerned, two varieties have been found. The first offers a tighter control on student production, since it consists in completing an unfinished sentence with an idiomatic phrase (Gude and Duckworth 1997: 91, 107, 119, 147, 187, 200).

The second (free writing) gives more freedom in that it is the student himself who decides on a sentence which will include the idiomatic expression. This alternative is found mainly in Bywater (1985: 73, 182, 229) and Jones (1993: 35, 93, 128, 190).

Finally, the story-telling exercise. Occasionally, students are asked to prepare a short story that will use and illustrate one of the idioms studied in the lesson. This is a spoken version of the free writing activity explained above.

Once the treatment of idioms in coursebooks has been examined, two aspects become clear: the importance of the constituent parts and the motivation for the figurative reading.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, textbook writers have been specially careful about the way in which fixed phrases are introduced to learners. We have seen how idioms appear grouped according to features (syntactic, lexical or thematic). Similarly, exercises such as gap-filling focus attention on one word.

With respect to the second issue, meaning motivation, writers (above all Jones and Gude and Duckworth) take good care to choose transparent examples. This added to the fact that the items to be taught are related to a topic, enable the students to establish a virtually direct link between the way

things are and the way we conceptualize them. In other words, it is not by chance that a language possesses certain expressions and not others. Hence, the metaphoric interpretation is not presented as something arbitrary, but well-grounded. Furthermore, the exercises are designed to help students work out the figurative meaning by relying heavily on the other components of the sentence.

The conclusion reached is that the teaching of idioms in L2 appears to favour the cognitivist theory over other approaches. To measure the long term effectiveness of this choice more steps would need to be taken. Firstly, to extend this conception to all idiomatic expressions (transparent and opaque). A further stage would be the systematic testing of students production in order to see whether they actually use in a natural way those idioms they have been exposed to. But this would belong to another research project.

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