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Criteria for Identifying and Representing Idioms in a Phraseological Dictionary

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is (i) to present criteria for identifying idioms in order to create a practicable typology of idioms, (ii) to show that certain types of idioms have non–idiomatic equivalents, and (iii) to demonstrate the dynamic connection between idioms, proverbial phrases and idiomatic similes.
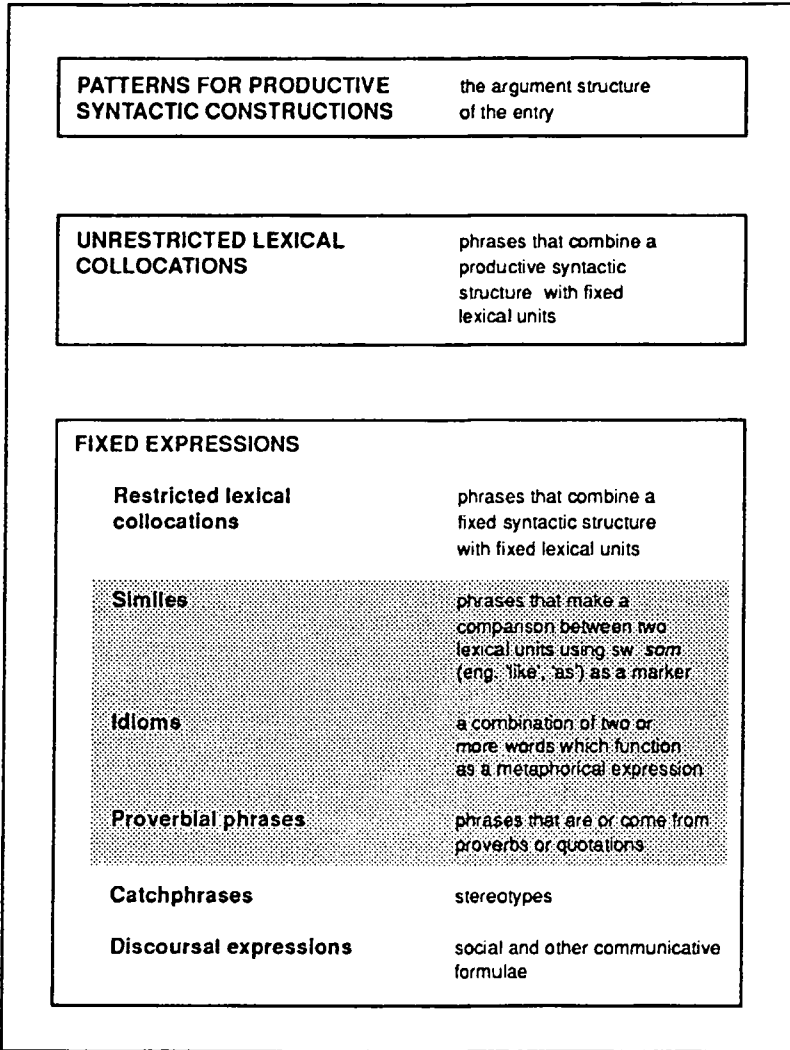
1. Introduction

The idiom is an elusive phraseological category. It has traditionally been regarded as a product of semantic processes. The idiom has mostly been described in terms of semantic transparency and the degree of proximity to the concrete world. Some research on idioms has been carried out from a more analytical basis with attempts to formalize the findings (Weinreich 1969; Burger 1973, 1982). The purpose in those cases was purely theoretical.

Our concept of the idiom is based on our task of developing a linguistic and lexicographic frame for a Swedish phraseological dictionary, which at present has the working title *Svensk konstruktionsordbok*. The only existing Swedish phraseological dictionary *Svensk handordbok* from 1967 is in many respects out of date. The major difference between the forthcoming completely new dictionary and the old one is that the material now will be analyzed strictly according to a model which we have developed for this purpose. This model serves as a guide for structuring and designating the entries (see Fig. 1). All phrases irrespective of phrase type have a syntactic form that reflects the argument structure of the entry, i.e. the obligatory and optional components. The phrases are presented as NP's, VP's and as other basic syntactical phrases and not as complete sentences unless they happen to be stereotyped in the very form of a sentence.

In the entries the phrases are presented in a hierarchical order from patterns for productive syntactic constructions to fixed expressions. By means of syntactical criteria we have achieved a basic classification of all phrases into three phraseological classes: patterns for productive syntactic constructions, unrestricted lexical collocations and fixed expressions. The class of fixed expressions consists of a set of different phrase types kept together by pragmatic and functional criteria. Within the class of fixed expressions there is a group of phrase types (shadowed in Fig. 1) of which the idiom is one.

A MODEL FOR ANALYZING TYPES OF PHRASES

PATTERNS FOR PRODUCTIVE SYNTACTIC CONSTRUCTIONS	the argument structure of the entry

UNRESTRICTED LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS	phrases that combine a productive syntactic structure with fixed lexical units

FIXED EXPRESSIONS

Restricted lexical collocations	phrases that combine a fixed syntactic structure with fixed lexical units
Similes	phrases that make a comparison between two lexical units using sw. *som* (eng. 'like', 'as') as a marker
Idioms	a combination of two or more words which function as a metaphorical expression
Proverbial phrases	phrases that are or come from proverbs or quotations
Catchphrases	stereotypes
Discoursal expressions	social and other communicative formulae

Figuur 1.

2. Basic criteria for identifying idioms

Our definition and analysis of the idiom is based on the study of idioms in relation to all other types of phrases that will be included in the dictionary. The idiom in our model is defined as a combination of two or more words which as a whole function as a metaphorical expression. It should be noticed that it is the whole phrase and not just a part of it that has been metaphorized. The idiom is interpreted according to the function it has in discourse, irrespective of what the single words mean when they are interpreted one by one. Thus in the idiom *cast pearls before swine* it is not the metaphors *pearls* and *swine* that give the phrase the status of being an idiom, but the fact that they are included in a whole phrase which in normal contexts is used in such a way that it is evident that the single words should not be understood in their literal sense but transferred to a metaphorical level.

3. Specific criteria for identifying idioms

The group of phrases in which the idiom is included also consists of similes and proverbial phrases (see Fig. 1 for definitions). Similes are comparisons like *vara som ett rött skynke för ngn* "be like a red rag to a person". Proverbial phrases are conventional utterances in the form of sentences like *man ska ta seden dit man kommer* "when in Rome you must do as the Romans do". These categories are parts of what we call an **idiom cluster** (see Fig. 2), where the idioms are at the center and the proverbial phrases and similes are at the outer edges (Clausén 1993). Similes and idioms often interact: *vara [som] ett rött skynke för ngn* "be [like] a red rag to a person". Proverbial phrases and idioms also interact: *[man ska] ta seden dit man kommer.*

3.1 Idioms with non–idiomatic equivalents

In analyzing the idioms we give special attention to literal counterparts. We have noted five types of idioms, four of which have phraseological, non–idiomatic equivalents. Earlier studies of idioms often discuss non–idiomatic equivalents in order to describe idiomaticity (Burger 1973: 25–31): the less semantically motivated they think an idiom is in relation to its literal counterpart, the higher the degree of idiomaticity. The authors of *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* (Cowie 1983: XII– XIII) are clear about the fact that one of their two categories of idioms called 'figurative idioms' have equivalents among the restricted collocations (e.g. *catch fire*).

The first type of idiom (a) has a non–idiomatic equivalent from which a complement is transferred from the status of examples to the status of fixed phrases. In the metaphorization focus is shifted and a verb is often weakened or even omitted. The idiomatic expression *vara [som] ett slag i ansiktet* "be [like] a slap in the face" with the metaphorical meaning 'be an insult' has the

non–idiomatic equivalent *ge någon ett slag* "give a person a slap" (e.g. *han gav honom ett slag i ansiktet* "he gave him a slap in the face").

The second type of idiom (b) has a non–idiomatic equivalent with an optional complement which is transferred and has become obligatory in the metaphorization. The idiomatic expression *få smäll på fingrarna* "get a rap on the knuckles" with the metaphorical meaning 'be reprimanded' has a non–idiomatic equivalent *få smäll [på fingrarna]* "get a rap [on the knuckles]" (e.g. *pojken fick smäll på fingrarna i skolan* "the boy was rapped on the knuckles at school").

The third type of idiom (c) has a non–idiomatic equivalent which has the same form, but one part which is variable has become non–variable in the metaphorized expression. The idiomatic expression *slå näven i bordet* "hit the table with one's fist" with the metaphorical meaning 'firmly object to something' has the non–idiomatic equivalent *slå näven i bordet/katedern* "hit the table/desk with one's fist" (in Swedish an adverbial is obligatory here).

The fourth type of idiom (d) has a non–idiomatic equivalent with exactly the same form but with different meaning. The idiomatic expression *spela teater* "play theatre" with the metaphorical meaning 'put on an act' has the non–idiomatic equivalent *spela teater* with the meaning 'act'.

If we analyze the non–idiomatic expressions we find that they belong to different categories in our model: the equivalents of type (a), type (b) and type (c) are unrestricted collocations, the equivalents of type (d) belong to restricted collocations (see Fig. 1).

3.2 Unique idioms

There are idioms (e) that do not have any equivalents among the lexical collocations. The phrase *kasta ut barnet med badvattnet* "throw the baby out with the bathwater" has the metaphorical meaning 'lose the precious things when doing away with the waste'.

3.3 The idiom cluster

We have found that all types of idioms, both idiomatic equivalents and unique idioms, have their special places in the idiom cluster (see Fig. 2). Idioms of type (e) can interact with the proverbial phrases. A touch of modality can often be found in these idioms, e.g. in *kasta ut barnet med badvattnet* which can be changed to a proverbial phrase: *man ska inte kasta ut barnet med badvattnet*. Idioms of type (a) can interact with the similes, e.g. *vara [som] ett i ansiktet*. Idioms of type (b), type (c) and type (d) have central, fixed places in the cluster.
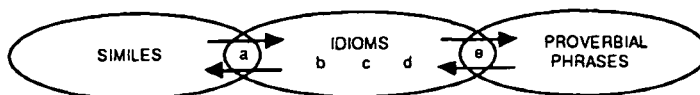
THE IDIOM CLUSTER

Figure 2.

4. Conclusion

Our analysis of idioms has demonstrated that there are five types of idioms, some of which often have literal phraseological counterparts. This has lead us to conclude that unrestricted collocations as well as restricted collocations are just as important as idioms and should be represented in a phraseological dictionary. So not only idioms but also non–idiomatic equivalents will be presented in our dictionary so that the user can benefit by the analysis of the equivalents for the understanding of metaphorical expressions.

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