

A Study of the Problems of Learning and Translating Idioms

Asst. Prof. Dr. **Abdul Majeed Hameed Joodi***

Abstract

Idioms are a very important part of the English language: you are told that if you want to *go far* (succeed) you should *pull your socks up* (make a serious effort to improve your behaviour, the quality of your work, etc.) and use your *grey matter* (brain).¹ Learning and translating idioms have always been very difficult for foreign language learners. The present paper explores some of the reasons why English idiomatic expressions are difficult to learn and translate. It is not the aim of this paper to attempt a comprehensive survey of the vast amount of material that has appeared on idioms in Adams and Kuder (1984), Alexander (1984), Dixon (1983), Kirkpatrick (2001), Langlotz (2006), McCarthy and O'Dell (2002), and Wray (2002), among others. The paper concentrates on idioms as a learning-translation problem; it makes no claim to be comprehensive or academically rigorous. Leech (1989) defines an idiom as follows: "An idiom is a group of two or more words which we have to treat as a unit in learning a language. We cannot arrive at the meaning of the idiom just by adding together the meanings of the words inside it. E.g. *John and Mary used to be hard up* (= 'They had very little money'.)" (P.186)

To be more exact, an idiom is a sequence of words which is semantically and syntactically restricted, so that they function as a single unit. From a semantic point of view, the meanings of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meanings of the idiomatic expression as a whole. Thus, *fly off the handle*, which means *lose one's temper*, cannot be understood in terms of the meanings of *fly*, *off*, or *handle*. The idiom phrase *hot air*, which means *empty or boastful talk*, is neither hot nor air; with *hot air* we are dealing with a set phrase where the meaning cannot be suggested on the basis of the two constituent words. The idiomatic meaning of *spill the beans* in *So who spilt the beans* (=told the secret) *about her affair with David?* has nothing to do with beans or with spilling in its literal sense. The foreign-language learner is left trying to figure out where and how the beans were spilt.

From a syntactic viewpoint, the constituent parts of an idiom often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts. The point to be emphasized here is this: most idioms do not lend themselves easily to manipulation by speakers and writers; they are invariable and must be learned as wholes, but concord of number, person and gender in the idiom phrase is still necessary, i.e. the verbs must be put into the correct form, and pronouns must agree with their antecedents: *I don't give a hoot for her opinion!*² • *She doesn't give a hoot for my opinion!* etc.) || *He won, but only by the skin of his teeth*² • *She won, but only by the skin of her teeth* • *I won, but only by the skin of my teeth, I had to run for the train, and caught it by the skin of my teeth*, etc. || *He kept pulling my arm, throwing me off my balance*² • *She kept pulling his arm, throwing him off his balance* • *We kept pulling her arm, throwing her off her balance, etc.*²

The present paper is divided into five parts, as follows: Part I: *An Overview*; PART II: *Learner's Difficulties with Idioms*; PART III: *Some Pedagogical recommendations and*

* Dept. of English - College of Education for Women - University of Baghdad.

Suggestions about Idioms; Part IV: Activities to Practice Idiomatic Expressions; Part V: Summary and Conclusion.

I. AN OVERVIEW

1.1 Opening Remarks

The introduction to the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*³ states: "Familiarity with a wide range of idiomatic expressions, and the ability to use them appropriately in context, are among the distinguishing marks of a native-like command of English" (Cowie and Mackin, 1975:vi). While many foreign-language learners may be satisfied with something less than native-like or near-complete command, idiomatic usage is so common in English that it can be difficult to speak or write without using idiomatic expressions (see Seidl and McMordie, 1978). The learning and translation of idioms must, therefore, be considered an integral part of the learning-translation process.

1.2 Characteristics of Idioms

There are two main characteristics that distinguish idioms from non-idiomatic (=literal) expressions: 1) metaphorical meaning, and 2) invariability. Idiomatic expressions "vary a great deal in *how* metaphorical or invariable they are. In other words, *idiomaticity* (the quality of being idiomatic) is a matter of degree or scale" (Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, 1979: viii; cf. Fernando, 1996).

1.2.1 Metaphorical Meaning

Idiomatic expressions are, in a very broad sense, metaphorical rather than literal. Because an idiom is metaphorical, its meaning is not predictable from the usual meanings of the separate words from which it is formed. This can be seen in, for example, *to be on top of the world* (=to be extremely happy) and *to be hard up* (=to lack money): *After winning the batting title, Carol appeared to be on top of the world • We were very hard up when I lost my job.*

Similarly, idioms such as *Actions speak louder than words* or *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree* are very particular to the English language and do not make sense when you try to understand them verbatim. In these two idiomatic expressions, actions are not really 'speaking,' and there is no apple or tree. Literally translating the sentences will not help you understand them any better; you simply must memorize what these idioms mean as a whole, so you do not feel lost when someone says one to you. Similarly, *Don't count your chickens before they hatch* has nothing to do with chickens at all; rather, the idiom is used as a warning to someone who is counting on a certain event happening before it actually does happen. If you assume you will get a great job and buy yourself a Mercedes with the mentality 'I'll get my money back when I get my pay check', you are 'counting your chickens before they hatch' because you are spending a lot of money on a car before you know for sure that you have that money to spend.

Another common idiom used frequently is *Don't cry over spilt milk*. Again, this expression has absolutely nothing to do with milk. Instead, the milk is a metaphor for a past event that you are worrying about right now. This expression implies that 'what happens in the past stays in the past,' so you shouldn't be upset or 'cry' about something bad that happened yesterday (*spilt milk*) that you cannot do anything about now. The idiom *go to the wall* does not simply mean 'to walk over to a wall', but 'to become bankrupt or

financially ruined': *Several firms have gone to the wall recently*. The idiom phrase **let one's hair down** is not connected with anything done to one's hair: it means to enjoy oneself or behave wildly: *Playing softball is just a good way to let your hair down and have fun*. The idiomatic verb phrase **pull your socks up** has nothing to do with socks or pulling them up, but means to make greater effort, especially to control oneself or improve one's work: *I won't allow lazy students in this class; you'll all have to pull your socks up if you are to meet the expected standard*. The phrase **wait until/till kingdom come** (=to wait for an extremely long time) has no literal meaning at all and may only be used as an idiom: *You'll have to wait until kingdom come for him to buy you a drink!* The sentence **She nearly fell off her chair when they told her the price** is just a metaphorical way of saying *she was very surprised*. It is quite likely that she did not even move in her chair, and it is probable that she was not sitting in a chair at all.

In **white wine**, **white man**, **white coffee**, and **white noise**⁴, *white* can be said to be idiomatic in the sense that in combination with certain nouns the meaning of *white* changes. In none of the four instances of *white* above does *white* have its usual meaning. Instead, in the examples it means *yellowish*, *pinkish* (or *pale brown*), *brownish*, *containing many frequencies with about equal amplitude*, respectively. With **white wine/man/coffee/noise** we are dealing with set phrases where the meaning can at least be suggested on the basis of one part of the idiomatic phrase which is used literally. In the case of **white lies** and **blue jokes** the logical link with a colour is less apparent still. Conceivably *white* in *a white lie* (=a lie that is told in order to be polite or to stop someone from being upset by the truth) suggests purity of intention. In the case of *blue joke* knowing what part of the colour spectrum is indicated by the word *blue* gives us no help in understanding what a blue joke is.

1.2.2 Invariability

Idioms are more or less invariable, both in wording and in certain grammatical ways. They cannot, therefore, be changed or varied in the way literal expressions are normally varied, whether in speech or writing. Some idioms cannot be changed at all, e.g. **in order to**: *I sent the plans in order for you to study them fully before the meeting*. The idiomatic sentence **The University praised the students who had worked to help those who were out-and-down in London* is ill-formed, whereas *The University praised the students who had worked to help those who were down-and out in London* is perfectly acceptable. In brief, most idioms resist variation in form, and tend to be relatively fixed with regard to the following.

A. Replacement (Substitution)

A speaker or writer cannot normally replace a word with another in the idiom phrase. We cannot say **on top of the universe/globe*, but we can say **on top of the world** (=to be very happy). **Spill the peas** is not an idiomatic expression but **spill the beans** (=to give away secret information) is idiomatic. *If you kill two birds with one stone* you manage to achieve two things in a single action, but not **kill two birds with one shot*. **A male chauvinist pig** (abbreviated to *mcp*) is an insulting name for **a male chauvinist** (=a man who believes that women are naturally less important, less clever, etc. than men and so does not treat them equally with men), but not **a male chauvinist boar*. Similarly, in the verb phrases **give up the ghost** and **kick the bucket** (both meaning to die), one cannot

substitute words that are close in meaning in these phrases. *The man gave up the ghost* and *The man kicked the bucket* both mean *The man died*, but a substitution such as *The man gave up the apparition*, *The man released the ghost*, or *The man kicked the pail* tends to make the phrase literal and idiomatic meaning is lost.

In an idiom sentence like *John kicked the bucket* (=died) *at 5 o'clock*, the noun phrase *the bucket* cannot be replaced by a pronoun.⁵ One cannot, thus, say **John kicked it at 5 o'clock*. The adjective *easy* in *The answer is easy* can be replaced by *simple*: *The answer is simple*, but in the idiomatic expression *The examination was (as) easy as pie* (=very easy), the word *simple* cannot be used, hence the unacceptability of **The examination was (as) simple as pie*. We also say: **over the moon** (=absolutely delighted; ecstatic), but not **over the stars* || **meet (someone) half-way** (=to reach a compromise with (someone)), but not: **meet (someone) midway* || **hold one's horses** (=to not rush too quickly into an action or decision), but not **pull up one's horses* || **a tempest in a teapot** (also **a storm in a teacup**) (=an unimportant matter that a lot of people become upset about), but not **a tempest in a teacup* or **a storm in a teapot*. In sum, it is, important to know when and how the words in the idioms can change.

B. Word Order

We cannot change the order of words in an idiomatic expression, e.g. *It was raining cats and dogs* (=It was raining very hard), but not **It was raining dogs and cats*. The idiom phrase *be left high and dry* (but not **be left dry and high*) means to be left without any help or without the things you need. If a situation is **touch-and-go** (but not **go-and touch*), it is uncertain. A few more examples may be useful here.

go/be at hammer and tongs (also **go/be at it hammer and tongs**) =to fight or argue very loudly: *They were going at each other hammer and tongs*, but not *They were going at each other tongs and hammer* || **(down-and-out: (a) (adjective)** =very poor, with nowhere to live and no job; **(b) (noun)** =someone who has nowhere to live and no job or money: *a down-and-out actor* || **hale and hearty** ((especially of old people) =healthy and strong) || **spick and span** ((especially of a place) =very clean and tidy || **hue and cry** (=a noisy expression of public anger or disapproval || **to and fro** (=in one direction and then in the opposite direction, a repeated number of times || **waijs and strays** (=people without anywhere to stay for various reasons) || **kith and kin** (=people with whom you are connected especially by family relationship) || **bag and baggage** (=with all one's belongings). However, the order may be reversed in **there and then** (*then and there*), which means at that moment and in that place: *They wanted me to make a decision there and then*, and in **on and off** (*off and on*) =sometimes but not regularly: *He's been taking drugs off and on since he was 15*.

C. Number

Almost all idiomatic expressions do not in one way or another admit of the usual grammatical operations which literal phrases will permit. For example, we cannot turn the object of the idiomatic expressions **give up the ghost** and **kick the bucket** into the plural without losing the idiomatic meaning. Thus, one would not say **The men gave up the ghosts*/**The men kicked the buckets*. However, a singular noun may be replaced by a plural noun in a literal sentence, e.g. *The men kicked the (milk) buckets/pails*. One cannot turn **cats and dogs** in *It was raining cats and dogs* into the singular, either: **It was raining a cat and a dog*).

In the idiom **go cap in hand (to somebody)** (=to ask someone for something, especially money, in a very polite way that makes one seem unimportant), the two words *cap* and *hand* remain unchanged even if the subject of the sentence or clause is plural: *Advertisers used to go to museums, cap in hand, to ask permission to use a painting for an advertisement. In close up shop* (=to stop doing something for a period of time or permanently), *shop* cannot be replaced by *shops*: *Some of the big ad agencies close up shop/*shops early for the holidays*. In the idiom *jump the gun* (=to start doing something too soon, especially without thinking about it carefully), one must always say *the gun*; it cannot become *the guns*: *The men jumped the gun/*the guns by building the garage before permission had been given*.

On the other hand, we cannot turn the direct object of the idiomatic phrase **call somebody names** (=to insult someone by using words that are not nice to describe them) into the singular: *He went out and confronted him, calling him names/*a name*. Likewise, the word *cakes* in **cakes and ale** (=fun; pleasant activity) is usually used in the plural: *A farmer's life is not all cakes/*cake and ale*. In the following examples, the underlined items, too, remain unchanged (plural only): **a house of cards** (=an insecure arrangement (often in the phrase *collapse/fall down like a house of cards*)): *When he discovered his wife loved someone else, his whole life fell down around him like a house of cards* || **on the cards** =possible: *It's on the cards that she'll buy a house in London soon* || **turn up trumps** (=to do the right or needed thing, especially at the last moment): *My brother turned up trumps and lent me the money to go on holiday* || **the blues** (=feelings of sadness): *A lot of women get the blues after the baby is born* || **picks up the pieces** (=to put matters back into their usual good order after they have been brought to a state of confusion or disorder by a fight, unexpected event, etc.): *The town is beginning to pick up the pieces after the worst mass shooting in UK history* || **not see the forest/wood for the trees** (=to be unable to understand something because you are looking too much at small details rather than the whole thing): *The aim of this book is to give an overall view of the history of the country - it's designed for readers who otherwise wouldn't see the forest for the trees*.

Some idioms, however, do allow both a singular and a plural form, as in: **shit a brick/shit bricks** (=to be extremely frightened or worried): *He was shitting bricks while his wife was having her first baby* || **a nest egg/nest eggs** (=an amount of money that one has saved): *Mary and Harry had to dip into their retirement nest egg to pay for their son's college fees • Many young people today have nest eggs* || **not give/care a hoot/two hoots** (used when saying that one does not care about something at all): *Nobody seems to give a hoot about recycling* || **as busy as a bee/bees** =very busy: *Parents of young children are always as busy as a bee* || **be (all) skin and bone(s)** (=to be very thin in a way that is not healthy or attractive): *A lot of these fashion models are all skin and bones* || **pick somebody's brain/brains** (=to ask someone who knows a lot about something for information and advice about it): *If you have time later, I'd like to pick your brain(s) about some legal matters*.

It should be noticed that often when the subject of the verb in the idiom phrase is plural, any other nouns in the idiom may also become plural. For example, in **laugh up one's sleeve** (=to be secretly happy, especially because one has played a trick on someone or criticized them without their knowing), we would usually use *sleeve* in the plural if the subject of the verb is plural: *They were laughing up their sleeves*. In actual speech, such a

noun may be left in the singular: *They were laughing up their sleeve*, but it is usually better to use the plural form of the noun in such cases.

D. The Use of Determiners

The fixity of determiners in idiomatic expressions is of vital importance. We can say: **a dead duck** (=someone or something that is very unlikely to be successful, especially because of a mistake or bad judgment), but not **the/that dead duck*. Similarly, we cannot replace the determiner **the** of **bury the hatchet** by **a**: *bury the/*a hatchet*. However, the following are fully acceptable: **the/a big cheese** =an important or powerful person in an organization: *So, you're the big cheese here, are you?* • *A big cheese from NASA gave a speech* || **as dead as the/a dodo** =very old-fashioned || **the long and (the) short of it** =the general conclusion or a situation of a story without going into any more detail: *So the long and short of it is I've lost my job.*

E. The Use of Comparatives and Superlatives

Idioms tend to be relatively fixed with regard to the use of comparatives and superlatives. *Someone, especially a child, is as good as gold if they behave very well*: she's been as good as (but not * *better than*) **gold all evening** || **as fit as a fiddle** (also: *as right as rain*) (=in very good health), but not * *fitter than a fiddle* || **(as) pretty as a picture** (=very/extremely pretty), but not **prettier than a picture* || **(as) dry as dust** (=very boring), but not **drier than dust* || **have bigger fish to fry** (=have more important, interesting, etc. things to do), but not* *have the biggest fish to fry* || **easier said than done** =(saying) merely suggesting some course of action is very much easier than actually carrying it out || **close/dear/near to somebody's heart** =very important or interesting to someone: *This particular topic is obviously very close to my heart* (Compare: *Nobody is nearer his heart than his daughter*) || **in a good/bad light** =in a favourable/unfavourable way: *He was concerned that the film had shown him in a bad light* =made him seem to be a bad person • *She has always liked me, and in everything she says about me she makes me appear in a (very) good light* (Compare: *Press reports make his actions appear in the worst possible light*) || **one's nearest and dearest** is one's family: *Our nearest and dearest (our families) need our care, don't they?* || **one's best/strongest cards** (=one's strongest or most effective argument), but not **one's better/stronger cards*.

F. The Use of Actives/Passives

Normally a transitive verb phrase can be changed to a passive: *The man kicked the pail* || *The pail was kicked by the man*. When one uses an idiom, however, some grammatical operations, like the formation of the passive, are impossible. For example, one may use the idiom *kick the bucket* in a sentence like *At 3 o'clock John kicked the bucket*. We cannot change the grammatical structure of this sentence, i.e. we cannot re-write the sentence in the passive. It would sound quite unnatural to say *At 3 o'clock the bucket was kicked by John*. One may also say, literally, *At 3 o'clock the bucket (=the pail) was kicked by John*. Similarly, while **spill the beans** (=to tell something that someone else wanted you to keep a secret) is fully acceptable, **The beans were spilt* is not. If two people **bury the hatchet** they stop disagreeing with each other: *Can't you two bury the hatchet and get back to a normal working relationship!*, but not **The hatchet was buried*. If **someone pulls your leg** they deceive you in a way that is intended to be humorous: *Stop pulling my leg - you*

haven't been having lunch with the President! Compare: *His face lost a little of its buoyant expression; he was not sure whether his leg was pulled* (Wain, 1960: 38).

If you **let the cat out of the bag**, you let a secret be known, usually without intending to: *He let the cat out of the bag when he mentioned the party to her -it was supposed to be a surprise, but not *The cat was let out of the bag. Be bitten by the bug/craze etc.* is to develop a very strong interest in or desire for something: *He's been bitten by the sailing bug*, but not **The sailing bug has bitten him. Not many voices were raised against that decision* is a passive idiom sentence, whereas *He raised his voice against the lack of provision for the mentally sick* is active. Likewise, the following are passive idiom sentences: *To this part of the scheme several objections were raised* || *There are many inconveniences that have to be put up with when you are camping* || *Unpleasant episodes in his early career were swept under the carpet/rug* || *She was cut to the quick by his cruel words (cut somebody to the quick (=to hurt a person's feelings deeply): His cruel words cut her to the quick* || *The riot act was read to them by me • They were read the riot act by me (read (somebody) the riot act =to give someone a strong warning that they must stop causing trouble): I read them the riot act* || *A top executive was given the boot (by the company) for his role in improper financial dealings (be given the boot =to be told to leave your job or your school). Compare: give somebody the boot (=to dismiss someone from their job; fire): The company gave a top executive the boot for his role in improper financial dealings; get the boot (=be given the boot): He was useless, and soon got the boot* (see also 2.1 (7)).

G. Negation

There are a number of idioms which are always negative, e.g. **not (even) blink** (=to not seem at all surprised) or **not turn a hair** (=not show fear, dismay, surprise, etc. when such a reaction might be expected): *I didn't blink an eye in spite of the expense*, but not: **I blinked an eye in spite of the expense* || *David didn't turn a hair when the gun went off*, but not: **David turned a hair when the gun went off*. Similarly, we have: *I don't care/give a straw for (=I don't care at all about) your opinion*, but not: **I care a straw for your opinion*.

H. Deletion

One cannot delete a word from the idiom phrase, e.g. **a spanner in the works** =a cause of confusion or ruin to another person's plans, work, etc.: *A sudden thunderstorm put/threw a spanner in the works and we had to abandon our plans for a day out.* || **(stuck) between a rock and a hard place** =having a choice between two things, both of which are dangerous, unpleasant, etc. || **a red-letter day** =a day that will never be forgotten: *It'll be a red-letter day for Mary when she's paid off all her debts*. It follows then that **spanner in works*, **between rock and hard place* and **red-letter day*, respectively are unacceptable. Compare: **In the light of something** (American **in light of**) =in view of something/considering something || **the dead of (the) night** =the quietest darkest part of the night when everyone is asleep || **in (the) face of** =in the presence of; before.

1.3 Agreement in the Idiom Phrase

Although most idioms are invariant and must be learned as wholes, the verbs must still be put into the correct form: *He doesn't/I don't care a hoot/two hoots what people think*,

and pronouns must agree with their antecedents: *We woke up late and caught the plane by the skin of **our** teeth* || *I had **my** heart in **my** boots when **I** went to see the boss* • *Mary had **her** heart in **her** boots when **she** went to see the boss* • *Dick had **his** heart in **his** boots when **he** went to see the boss, etc. (**have one's heart in one's boots** =to feel discouraged or fearful).*

Often words in the idiom phrase may inflect or change in form. If the word is a verb, all tenses may be used and the subject may be plural as well as singular: *He **has jumped** the gun* • *They **have jumped** the gun* • *Be careful that you **don't jump** the gun (**jump the gun** =to take action too soon or before the proper time)* || *The government **has blown hot and cold** on this bill, and we just don't know where they stand now (**blow hot and cold** =to have positive and then negative opinions or feelings about something or someone again and again)* || *I immediately **saw red** and wanted to prove him wrong (**see red** =to become very angry)* || *He really knows how to push Dad's buttons (**push somebody's buttons** =to make someone angry by doing or saying something that annoys them)* || *I now believe that throughout our conversation she was **laughing up her sleeve** (**laugh up one's sleeve** =to laugh to oneself; be amused secretly)* || *Whenever he quarrels with his wife **his work goes (all) to pieces*** • *Under the pressure of police questioning she **went to pieces** and confessed everything* • *You know how **I go to pieces** under cross-examination* • *Since his wife's death, he **has gone to pieces** (**go (all) to pieces** =to be so upset or nervous that one cannot think or behave normally)* || *The chairman is holding **his** cards close to his chest on the question of a merger (**hold/keep/play your cards close to your chest/vest** =to keep your plans, thoughts or feelings secret).*

Besides, number and gender agreement affects pronouns and determiners in the idiom phrase. The idiomatic verb phrase **push one's luck** (=to take foolish risks) may take any of the following forms: *The boss has already increased **my** wages three times this year, and I'd be pushing **my** luck if **I** asked for more money just now* • *The boss has already increased **Mary's** wages three times this year, and **she'd** be pushing **her** luck if **she** asked for more money just now* • *The boss has already increased **John's** wages three times this year, and **he'd** be pushing **his** luck if **he** asked for more money just now* • *I know **you** beat Adam easily, but if **you** agreed to fight Ali I think **you'd** be pushing **your** luck* • *Don't push **your** luck – I know the boss paid **you** more money last week but he doesn't have to always.* These examples clearly show that the subject of the verb must be the same person as the one whose luck it is, hence the unacceptability of **They pushed my luck.* **She pushed his luck.*

1.4 Grammatical Patterns of Idioms

Idiomatic expressions in English correspond to a wide range of grammatical types or patterns. This feature of idiomatic usage causes difficulties even for advanced learners of the language. Below is but a sample of the great diversity of grammatical patterns in which idiomatic expressions may occur.⁶

1.4.1 Noun Phrases

a. article + adjective + noun

the last straw =the final culminating circumstance that makes a situation unendurable. The allusion is to the proverb *It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back* || *a lame duck* =a political official whose period in office will soon end: *a lame-duck*

president/governor/legislature, etc. =a president, governor, legislature, etc. with no real power because their period in office will soon end || **A live wire** =an active, eager, lively person: *That child's a real live wire, so we had difficulty in keeping him quiet when we took him to the concert.*

b. article + present participle + noun

a parting shot =a cruel or severe remark that you make just as you are leaving, especially at the end of an argument: *As he walked out the door, Lee took a parting shot at his wife* || **a sitting duck** =someone who is easy to attack or easy to cheat: *We were like sitting ducks for pickpockets in the city.*

c. article + past participle + noun

If something *is a foregone conclusion* it is certain to have a particular result, even though it has not yet happened: *The last three elections were all foregone conclusions* (=people knew what the results would be).

d. article + noun + prepositional phrase

A subtype of idiom noun phrase consists of an article + noun + complementation by a prepositional phrase. **The salt of the earth** is someone who is ordinary, but good and honest: *Journalists are the salt of the earth, in my opinion.* Such idiomatic noun phrases may function like particular parts of speech. For example, it will often function in a sentence in the same way a noun would, as subject, direct object, or, perhaps most frequently, as complement. Thus *the salt of the earth* above will normally be used as subject complement in *He is the salt of the earth.*

1.4.2 Transitive Verb Phrases

a. Verb + Noun Phrase

Some idiomatic expressions are verb phrases consisting of a transitive verb plus a noun phrase as direct object, e.g. **break the bank** =used to say that you can afford to buy something: *Well, I don't think it'll break the bank if we only go away for a weekend* || **fill/fit the bill** =to be exactly what you need: *If you're looking for a good collection of stories for children, this book will fit the bill* || **make somebody's day** =to make someone very happy: *Your smile makes my day* || **let the cat out of the bag** (=to tell a secret): *Father wasn't supposed to know about his birthday surprise - now you've let the cat out of the bag!*

These examples clearly show that only subjects need to be added to make full sentences of the idiomatic verb phrases.

b. Verb + *it*

A number of idiomatic verb phrases have the pronoun **it** as a fixed part of the idiom. The pronoun does not refer back to a word or phrase used earlier in a text or conversation as it normally does (*Tom likes ice cream but Bill can't eat it*). The following **it**-phrases are idioms in their own right: **snuff it** =to die: *His son succeeded in making him sign a paper giving all his money to him just before the old man snuffed it* || **live it up** =to have an exciting and happy time: *Lisa was living it up like she didn't have a care in the world* || **come off it!** =to stop lying or pretending: *Oh, come off it, George. Lisa wouldn't do that* || **cheese it!** =run away quickly! (used to warn of danger): *Cheese it, boys, I can hear someone coming!* || **beat it!** =used to tell someone to leave at once because they are

annoying you or should not be there: *Go on, you kids! Beat it! Now!* || **push it** (also: *push one's luck*) =to take increasing risk: *If we don't leave until 5 p.m., we'll be pushing it to get to the airport (dead) on time* || **lump it** =to accept a situation, decision, etc. without complaint; bear something patiently (usually in the phrase *like it or lump it*): *Like it or lump it, we can't afford a holiday this year.*

1.4.3 Verbal Phrases

A large number of the words most commonly used in spoken and written English fall into the category of idiomatic verbal phrases. These constitute an important but rather problematic area of English (see Cowie and Mackin, 1975, especially the *Introduction*; Duff, 1989; Leech et al. 1982). The term *idiomatic verb phrases* is employed here to denote combinations of a verb and one or more adverbs or prepositions that function together as a single unit of meaning. An idiomatic verb phrase may consist of the following:

1. a *lexical verb* plus an *adverb particle* (=a phrasal verb). The particle, which is usually an adverb, simply adds to the meaning of a verb: *When I **turned round**, I saw Ann behind me* || *The train **pulled away** from the station*, or it can completely change the meaning of a verb: *A car suddenly **pulled up** behind me* (=came to a stop) || *The students **broke off** as their teacher came into the room* (=stopped suddenly);⁷
2. a *lexical verb* plus a *preposition* (=a prepositional verb), where the preposition goes very closely with the verb and changes the meaning of the verb: *Mary really **takes after*** (=resembles) *her mother; she has the same eyes, nose and hair* || *Your new yellow tie **doesn't go with*** (=match) *your red shirt*;
3. a *lexical verb* plus *two particles*: the first particle is adverbial and the second prepositional (=phrasal-prepositional verb): *She refused to **put up with** his rudeness any longer* (=tolerate or endure) || *The health insurance scheme **came in for** a lot of criticism* (=met) || *I don't know why she did it. I **put it down to** haste* =to explain the reason for something, especially when one is guessing || *The public **turned out for*** (=came to) *the political meeting*. If you ***play one person off against*** another, you encourage them to argue with each other so that you can gain something: *Multinational companies can **play individual markets off against** each other.*

The point to be emphasized here is that even if one knows all the words in an idiomatic verbal phrase and understands all the grammar of the phrase, its meaning is, in many cases, independent of the separate elements that constitute it. For example, learners will know the meaning of *count* and *out*, or *turn* and *down*, but the two words used in combination (*You can **count me out**, He **turned down** lots of perfectly good suggestion*) have quite independent idiomatic meanings, *exclude* and *reject*, respectively. Although some analysts make metaphorical (or literal) meaning a criterion for verbal idioms, excluding combinations which have literal meaning (e.g. *Please **bring back** the mustard. I need it now*), it is not always easy to draw a line between metaphorical (or idiomatic) meaning and transparent (or literal) meaning. For example, ***get in*** seems literal when the implied object is a vehicle (e.g. *I got in and drove off*); but is it literal or metaphorical when the meaning is *into one's own home* (e.g. *I usually get in by 7 pm*) or *into Parliament* (e.g. *He got in by a tiny majority*)?

It may also be noted that changing the position of the particle in a phrasal verb can have a major effect on the meaning, so that *She couldn't **get over** the message* (=She was very

surprised by it) does not mean the same as *She couldn't get the message over* (=She couldn't make the other people understand it). Compare: *Take off* your coat =*Take* your coat *off*, and *I've given up chocolate* =*I've given* chocolate *up*.

By combining a verb and an adverb or preposition in this way, we can extend the usual meaning of the verb or create a new meaning different from any that the verb has on its own. We cannot, therefore, always guess the meaning of a phrasal verb from the usual meaning of the verb and the adverb or preposition. Besides, grammatical behaviour of phrasal verbs may be complex, and in many cases there are stylistic or contextual limitations on the way they can be used. Phrasal verbs are very common in English, but can complicate the task of the learner because of their meaning and grammar.

1.4.4 Alliterative Comparisons⁸

There are, in English, a large number of alliterative idiomatic expressions which compare a quality, condition, action etc. with a noun, for example: **(as) dead as a doornail** =truly dead: *The rat was dead as a doornail* || **(as) dead as a/the dodo** =completely dead or out of date: *Last year's fashions in clothes are dead as a dodo now* || **(as) fit as a fiddle** =in very good physical condition; very healthy: *She was fit as a fiddle when she came back from her holiday* || **(as) good as gold** =(especially of children) very well behaved: *The children are always as good as gold when they visit their grandfather* || **as bright as a button** =very clever and full of life: *My little daughter is as bright as a button*.

These idiomatic phrases have meanings which are not literal and which therefore may be difficult to understand. They emphasize the meaning of the first word and can often be equivalent to a modified adjective, i.e. an adjective modified by the intensifier **very**, as in **(as) easy as pie** =very easy.

So, too, expressions which start with **like** tend to suggest that they are idiomatic and, therefore, should not be interpreted literally. Someone who is **like a fish out of water** is uncomfortable because of the situations or surroundings they are in: *Mary felt like a fish out of water in her new school*. **Like a bat out of hell** means very fast; at top speed: *He dashed out of the door like a bat out of hell*. If advice, warnings, or rude remarks are **like water off a duck's back to someone**, they have no effect on them: *Their hints about his behaviour were like water off a duck's back*. **Like two peas in a pod** (also as **like as two peas (in a pod)**) means (especially of people) *exactly the same in appearance, behaviour, etc.*: *The twins are as like as /like two peas in a pod* =very similar to each other. Someone who is **like a cat on a hot tin roof** (=like a cat on hot bricks) is in a state of nervous anxiety: *She's been like a cat on a hot tin roof ever since she heard he's back in town*. If a person does something or goes somewhere **like a lamb to the slaughter** they do it without knowing what is going to happen and, therefore, act calmly and without fighting against the situation: *A great number of his country's young men went off to war in the 1940s like lambs to the slaughter*. Certain verbal idioms, e.g. **work like a horse** (=work very hard) are also similes and function in a similar way to the adjective phrases.

1.4.5 Prepositional Phrases

A subtype of idiom phrase is the prepositional phrase consisting of a preposition plus its object (or complement): **by hook or by crook** =by whatever methods prove necessary: *I know it looks difficult, but I'll finish this work by hook or by crook* || **in for a penny, in for a pound** =something that has been started must be finished, whatever the cost may be:

You'll just have to go through with it, in spite of everything. In for a penny, in for a pound, you know || **in the teeth of** =in spite of opposition or danger from something: *The new law was passed in the teeth of public protest.*

1.4.6 **be + Prepositional Phrase**

Some idioms consist of the verb **BE** followed by a prepositional phrase: **be at sixes and sevens** =be in confusion or in disagreement: *I'm at sixes and sevens about what to do* || **be in clover** =to be living comfortably because you have plenty of money: *After he won the competition, he was in clover for the rest of his life* || **be in the doghouse** =be in disgrace: *I'm in the doghouse for forgetting Valentine's Day* || **be on the rocks** =a relationship or business that is on the rocks is having a lot of problems and is likely to fail soon: *His third marriage was on the rocks* || **be between the devil and the deep blue sea** (also: **(stuck) between a rock and a hard place**) =be in a difficult situation where one has to choose between two equally bad things: *I was between the devil and the deep blue sea when I was told I had to pay my wife's debts or else go to prison.*

1.4.7 Pairs of Words

A good number of idioms consist of pairs of words joined by *and* or *or*, for example: **hue and cry** =a noisy expression of public anger or disapproval: *There has been a great hue and cry about the council's plans to close the school* || **waifs and strays** =children (or animals) without homes || **hand and foot** (usually in the phrase **wait on hand and foot**) =to look after someone like a servant: *She waited on him hand and foot* || **bag and baggage** =with all one's portable belongings: *They threw her out of the house bag and baggage* || **go to rack and ruin** =to gradually get into a very bad condition as a result of not being taken care of: *The old farmhouse had gone to rack and ruin* || **high and dry** =without help; deserted: *He took all the money and left her high and dry* || **spick-and-span** (adjective) =a room, house etc. that is spick-and-span is completely clean and neat: *By the time I got home, Paul had the kitchen looking spick-and-span* || **kith and kin** =relations and friends: *Our grandmother wanted all her kith and kin to be there for her birthday.*

Many of these pairs of words function as particular parts of speech. For example, the noun phrase **cats and dogs** in *It was raining cats and dogs* (=It was raining heavily) functions as an adverb. In *Miller is young and comparing him to the great quarter-backs is jumping the gun*, the underlined portion is subject complement. In *The local people accused the new comers of jumping the gun - they'd been waiting for houses for years but these new people had been given them straight away*, the underlined words have the function of being the object of the preposition **of**. In the examples below, the idiomatic expression **to and fro** functions as an adverb, an adjective, and a noun, respectively:

- The pendulum swung **to and fro**.* (If someone or something moves to and fro, they move in one direction and then back again.)
- a to-and-fro movement** =(of a repeated journey or movement) forwards and backwards or from one side to the other
- the busy **to-and-fro** of passengers at the train station* (=activity in which people or things move from place to place, pass in opposite directions, etc.)

A pie in the sky (noun) is a good idea, plan, suggestion, or promise that you do not think it will happen: *Building a baseball field downtown is just pie in the sky right now.* Compare: **pie-in-the-sky** (adjective) **promises**.

It may be noticed that some idiomatic expressions which consist of conjoined phrases involve opposites: **ups and downs** =the mixture of good and bad experiences that happen in any situation or relationship: *We had a lot of ups and downs in our marriage* || **blow hot and cold** =to be changeable in one's opinions, especially by saying sometimes interested and at other times uninterested in a plan: *My girlfriend blew hot and cold about going to the cinema. One minute she was keen to go, the next she wanted us to stay at home* || **in black and white** =making something crystal clear: *Why can't you understand it? Must I spell it out in black and white?* || **back and forth** =to and fro: *The argument went back and forth before it was settled* || **a love-hate relationship** =when you have conflicting emotions about a thing or person and you (probably) can't tear yourself away: *I have a love-hate relationship with Bombay. I mean the atmosphere's fantastic, but the traffic and the pollution....*

1.4.8 Sentences

Idiomatic expressions also span sentences of various structural types. There are, in English, a number of sayings which are usually complete sentences. These include both:

- a) the informal sayings, e.g. **You can't take it with you** =one cannot take one's possessions, especially one's money, to the grave: *He knew he couldn't take it with him, so he spent it all* || **There's always (a) next time** =there will always be another chance (usually used to encourage someone whose first attempt at doing something has failed, and
- b) the older and more metaphorical proverbs, e.g. **A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush** (often shortened to **a bird in the hand**) =something which one has really got it is better than a lot of nice things which one has not got || **A rolling stone gathers no moss** (often shortened to **a rolling stone**) =a person who frequently moves from one place of living, job, etc. to another will not become successful or wealthy || **All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy** (often shortened to **all work and no play**) =a person who spends all his time working will be a dull and uninteresting companion. **The buck stops with somebody** (also: **The buck stops here**) is used to indicate that a particular person is responsible for something: *It was John's decision to close the hotel; the buck stops with him.*

1.5 Variants in the Idiom Phrase

Despite the fixity of idioms, a certain amount of variation may be found in the form of the idiom itself, as shown below.

beat/flag a dead horse =waste one's energies: *She is flagging a dead horse by asking him to lend her money – he hasn't even got enough for himself* || **sell/go like hotcakes** =to be sold very quickly and in large amounts: *The new book sold/went like hotcakes* || **tear/pull one's hair out** =to be very anxious or angry about something: *I was pulling my hair out trying to find someone to help me* || **pass/send/take the hat round** =to collect money, especially to give to someone who deserves it: *When my brother got married, his friends passed the hat round (or passed round the hat) at work and bought him a present* || **scream/shout blue murder** =to complain very loudly: *The baby screamed blue murder when I put it in the bath* || **laugh/cry/talk/shout/scream one's head off** =to laugh/cry etc. very loudly: *Fans were screaming their heads off; a near/close shave* =narrow miss or escape from something undesirable: *Mike's had three car accidents, plus a few other pretty close shaves* || **take a firm/hard/strict, etc. line on something** =to have a

very strict attitude toward something: *The governor has taken a hard line on illegal immigration* || **a thin/fine line between** =only a slight difference between two things, one of which is something bad: *There's a fine line between arrogance and an awareness of self-worth*; **hard cheese!/cheddar!** =bad luck! (used when the speaker does not really care about another person's misfortune): *It's hard cheese for him if he can't go to the cinema with us* (=It's his misfortune, not ours!).

The idiom **a/the hair of the dog (that bit you)** means an alcoholic drink that is supposed to make you feel better after drinking too much alcohol the night before. **The/a hot line** is a telephone or other instrument by means of which one head of government can speak directly to another: *If the President of the USA needs to talk to Moscow in secret, he can use the hot line* • *The police have set up a hot line for relatives to contact about the train crash* || **beat the/a devil's tattoo** =to make a drumming sound by beating a table, etc. with one's fingers, especially as a sign of impatience or of thinking hard about something: *Whenever she gets angry, she never shouts but beats the devil's tattoo on her desk* || **up to the/one's ears/eyes/neck/eyeballs** =wholly concerned with something. The idiom **at/on the double** means immediately: *I headed for the commander's office on/at the double*. The idiomatic expression **come in from/out of the cold**, which consists of verb + adverb + preposition (=phrasal prepositional verb) + prepositional object, means to become accepted or recognized, especially by a powerful group of people: *The eight children have come in from the cold after eleven years of living a virtual 'hermit's life' in two caravans* (*Daily Mirror* 4 Oct.74, cited in *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*, p.60)

Some idioms are formed with prepositions, but usually we cannot decide which preposition to use according to logic, e.g.: **agree to** =to accept; to approve: *Has the committee agreed to your request?* || **agree with** =to have the same opinion as (someone): *I agree with you; it's a foolish answer.* || **differ from** =to be different from (someone or something): *The bed in the shop differs from the one I have at home.* || **differ with** =to disagree with (someone or an opinion): *I must differ with your opinion on the matter.* Yet other idioms are very open and allow a good number of certain types of words (e.g. nouns) to be used in certain positions, e.g. **down with + noun** (meaning *I/We don't want*) and **up with + N** (used to show that the speaker supports something): *Down with smoking /dictatorship /Socialism/ Capitalism /Communism /the government/the tyrant/the bosses/the laws that have kept us slaves, etc.!* ⁹ *Up with women's rights!* || **A mother/aunt/girl etc. in a million** (also: *one in a million* (or less common *thousand*)) means the best of all possible people or things: *Sherry spent her life helping the poor and the sick – she was a girl in a million.*

So, too, in the saying **You can't keep a good man down**, which means nothing can prevent a determined man from doing or trying to do what he intends to do (usually said when a person makes a new attempt to do something, especially successfully), other nouns may be substituted for *man*, e.g. *you can't keep a good football player/politician, etc. down*. The idiom **the talk of the town** (=the subject of everyone's conversation) may be used with other words apart from *town*: *Their marriage was the talk of the town. They had only known each other for a few weeks* • *The trial has been the talk of the campus/company etc* • *She makes herself the talk of every place she goes to by her thoughtlessness* (G. Bernard Shaw, (cited in *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*, 1979: 330).

Idiom phrases with the 's or s' form cannot usually be changed to *of*-phrases. For example, we cannot change the idiomatic expression **at arm's length** (=as far away from the body as the length of an arm; at a safe distance away) to **at the length of an arm*. However, in the case of *someone's* or *something's* in idiom phrases, the *of*-phrase is usually quite acceptable, especially if the *of*-phrase is long, e.g. **lie at someone's door** (=to be the responsibility of someone) might be changed, as in *The blame for this trouble lies at the door of those who advised us to buy a new untested machine* || **on someone's part** (also: *on the part of someone*) =of or by someone: *It was a mistake on the part of Jones/on Jones's part* (=Jones was mistaken) *to sign the contract without reading it* || **sit at someone's feet** or **sit at the feet of someone** =to be the pupil/student of someone; to learn from someone famous: *she does not intend to sit at the feet of an incompetent for years and years* • *The graduate student sat at the feet of the famous professor for years* || **in the presence of someone** or **in someone's presence** =close enough to be seen or heard by someone: *She insulted him in the presence of his friends* (with his friends there. Compare: **beat someone's brains out** (=to think about something very hard and for a long time), but not **beat the brains of someone out*).

There are also variants with different (=opposite) meanings. For example, the idiomatic expression **be in someone's good books** (=in high favour; highly approved of: *I think I'm back in Corinne's good books again*) has one variant expressing the opposite meaning **be in someone's bad/black books** =in disfavour with someone; seriously disapproved of: *I am in her black books because I didn't invite her to my birthday party* || **in (all) good faith** =with sincere or honest indications: *As a sign of his good faith, the company has agreed to replace the defective parts for free* **in bad faith** =with dishonest intentions: *If the board acted in bad faith* (=If they were deliberately not fair or broke an agreement), *the teacher who was dismissed should get her job back* || **the right/wrong shop** =the right/wrong person to give help, advice, etc.: *If you want help with French, you've come to the wrong shop: I don't know a word of it* || **be an open book** =to not have any secrets and be easily understood: *I'd always thought of Jeff as an open book* **be a closed book (to)** =a subject about which one knows very little: *Politics is a closed book to me, so don't ask me questions about it*. Other idiomatic expressions which involve oppositeness of meaning include the following:

In/out of line with somebody/something means *in/not in* accordance (with the ideas, practices, or standards of others): *Her views on free university education are in/out of line with those of most members of the committee* • *He is the type of politician who likes to be out of line with others in his party* || **shut** (also: **close**) **the door to/on something** =to make something impossible: *The workers' behaviour has shut the door to/on any new agreement on higher wages* **open the door to** =lead to, encourage; result in: *These innumerable minor regulations open the door to innumerable minor crimes* || **raise/lower one's sights** =to increase/reduce one's hopes or expectations: *Raise your sights because you really have nothing to fear* • *The club had hoped to collect enough money to redecorate all six rooms, but they had to lower their sights and only do three* || **laugh at** =to ridicule **laugh with** =to share the laughter of (someone): *Please, don't be offended; we were laughing with you, not at you*.

Be in/out of luck is to have/not have good fortune: *We're in luck; the train hasn't left yet* • *We're out of luck; the store's closed* || **on/off line** (especially of a machine or group of people) =working/not working; in or out of operation: *When he's back on line after his*

illness, tell him to phone me and we'll have a talk || **with one's tail up/down** =in good spirits/unhappy: *The members of the team were worried because of the captain's illness, but after winning their first game they've got their tails up and have a good chance of winning the competition* || **a bird in the hand** =something certain or known; something one already has/**a bird in the bush** =something uncertain; something that one may or may not be able to get || **close** (also: **shut**) **one's eyes to something** =to ignore something or pretend that one does not know it is happening: *We can't close our eyes to the fact that our town has a gang problem/open somebody's eyes to something* =cause somebody to become aware of facts or circumstance previously unnoticed or not fully understood: *The trip to third-world countries really opened the eyes of the delegation.*

However, we say **in long clothes** =still a baby: *I have known her since she was in long clothes*, but not: **in short clothes, and if someone's number is up* (but not **down*), they are going to die: *When the plane started to shake, Colin thought his number was up.*

1.6 Insertion/Addition of Words

Some idiomatic expressions are so fixed that they do not admit of the insertion/addition of words, especially adverbs, into/to the idiomatic expression. For example, we can put many adverbs within a non-idiomatic (=literal) sentence like *She went to the door*, as in *She went quickly/quietly/angrily/stealthily etc. to the door*. But it is not possible to insert such adverbs into an idiomatic expression like **go the whole hog** (=to do something thoroughly, or too well): *They went the whole hog and had a big lavish wedding*. However, there are, in English, idioms that do permit quite free insertion of adverbs and adjectives, e.g. **go (all) to pieces** =to be so upset or nervous that one cannot think or behave normally: *He went (all) to pieces when his wife kicked the bucket* || **make capital out of/from something** =to use a situation or event to help you get an advantage *The leader of the Opposition made (political) capital of the government's difficulties* • *He made (much/a great deal of, etc.) capital out of the fact that he had been to many countries* || **go through the (whole) card** (=to consider or try all the possibilities offered: *The public is advised to go through the (whole) card before it makes its choice in the election* || **get away with (blue) murder** =to not be punished for doing something wrong, or to be allowed to do anything you want, even bad things: *She lets those kids get away with (blue) murder* || **play (merry) hell** =to cause trouble for someone or something: *The snow played merry hell with the traffic* || **play the (very) devil with** =to do a lot of harm to: *Snow storms are playing the very devil with food deliveries to the area* || **be/feel under the weather** =unwell; indisposed: *Louise looked a little/a bit under the weather when I saw her.*

If someone's behaviour is out of line, it is not appropriate in a particular situation: *I thought what Kenny said was way out of line* || **run up a bill/expenses/debts** =to use a lot of something or borrow a lot of money, so that one will have to pay a lot of money: *She ran up a large/big/huge bill for all her new clothes* • *I ran up a large phone bill last month* • *Walter ran up a big bar bill at the hotel that made his boss angry*. In *It was raining cats and dogs* (=It was raining very hard), we cannot add adjectives: **It was raining nice cats and big dogs*. Likewise, we say **on the cards** (=likely or possible), but not **on the best/strongest cards* (cf. *one's best/strongest cards* (=one's strongest or most effective argument)) || **kick the bucket**, **but not *kick the enormous bucket* || **a close shave** (=a narrow escape), but not **a very close shave* || **face the music** (=face one's critics; face difficulties boldly), but not **face the classical music* || **the long and (the) short of it** (=all

that need be said; the general effect or result), but not **the very long and short of it*. Compare: **to this (very) day** =up to the present time: *She doesn't to this (very) day know whether her mother is alive or dead* || **a hot potato** =something difficult or dangerous to deal with: *Euthanasia for people who are incurably ill or very old is a political hot potato*.

Many taboo and impolite words may be inserted into otherwise fixed idioms as *intensifiers* (or *emphasizers*) when we cannot insert other adverbs and adjectives, e.g. *He went the whole **damn/bloody** hog* (see also 2.1 (7) below).

II. Learners' Difficulties With Idioms

2.1 Difficulties Involved in Learning Idioms

This section discusses some of the reasons why students regard idiomatic language as an area in which they have difficulties.

1. Idioms are not literal; they do not mean what they say. As has already been mentioned (1.2.1), an idiom is a phrase or construction whose meaning differs from the literal sense of its constituents and which functions as a single unit. A person might be said to **get/have cold feet** when they experience a loss of confidence and sometimes unwillingness before doing something risky or difficult: *They had cold feet at the last minute and refused to sell their house*. If you **buy a pig in a poke**, you buy something without seeing it or examining it carefully, so it might not be as good as you expected. If you have a **sweet tooth** you like eating sweet foods, especially sweets and chocolate. **Sweet talk** (=flattery) is an idiomatic (figurative) expression, but **sweet coffee** is not.

2. Even when foreign-language learners do master the meanings of some English idioms -since it is impossible for them to comprehend and produce all of them -it is still very difficult to learn to use them correctly. Idioms vary in formality from slang (e.g. **lead somebody by the nose** || **blow one's top/stack** || **you bet your boots**) to those which can be used in formal situations (e.g. **run risks**). In addition to situational appropriateness, many idioms have grammatical constraints. You can tell your friend that *It was so windy that we **didn't move a muscle*** but you cannot tell him that **It was so windy that we moved a muscle*. You can be **fed up with** something, but you cannot *feed him up with* the same thing.

3. Idioms range from the semi-transparent where either the meaning can be interpreted in terms of metaphor (**clip one's wings** =reduce someone's mobility) or because one part of the idiomatic phrase is used literally (**run up a bill** =to accumulate indebtedness) to the totally opaque (**go bananas** =lose one's temper).

4. Idioms which are not in frequent use are difficult to learn. If you say that trying to find something is like looking for **a needle in a haystack**, you mean that it is impossible or extremely difficult to find, especially because the area you have to search is too large. Idioms such as **a needle in a haystack** are difficult because they contain very low-frequency vocabulary. Those which occur only in the passive (e.g. **taken in by**), or only in the negative (e.g. **can't make head or tail of**), or those which are unusual in form (**come hell or high water**) are more difficult than those which follow simple grammatical patterns (**pass the buck** or **the buck stops here** || **bury the hatchet** || **the devil makes work for idle hands, etc.**).

5. Although most idioms resist variation in form, some are more flexible than others. The point to be emphasized here is that some idioms give rise to another form or part of speech which is quite commonly used. Such related forms may be found in examples like **split**

hairs (=to concern oneself with small unimportant differences, especially in arguments) and **hair-splitting** ((noun) =the act of paying too much attention to small differences and unimportant details): *Quarrelling about whether authors should get money from photocopies of their publications is much more than **splitting hairs** - it is very important! • Let's stop **splitting hairs** and get back to the main issue • It is this kind of **hair-splitting** that gives politics a bad name.*

The idiom phrase **call somebody names** (also: **call names at somebody**) means to say unpleasant things to or about someone: *The children were calling each other names from the end of the street.* **Name-calling** (noun) is the act of saying things that are not nice about someone: *There will be no profanity or name-calling in this classroom.* **Pull somebody's leg** is to tell someone something that is not true, as a joke: *I think she was just pulling your leg.* **A leg-pull** is a joke or something you do to try to trick someone in a funny way: *She has to learn to tolerate a few **leg-pulls** without getting annoyed • He had to suffer a great deal of **leg-pulling** from his friends because he had a new girlfriend.* **To fly a kite** is to say or do something in order to find out what the public opinion about a particular subject is; **kite-flying** is the act of trying to find out what people's opinion about something new will be by informally spreading news of it: *These rumours of a new political party are obviously a **kite-flying** exercise.*

A BBC radio reporter once quoted a conference speaker as saying *There was too much buck passing* (Lakoff and Johuson, 1982:35). The common form of the idiom is **pass the buck** =refuse to accept responsibility for something. And yet, we would not expect to hear *There was too much way giving for give way* (=make concessions): *We mustn't give way to these impudent demands.* **There was too much bean spilling* is not acceptable while *The beans were by then pretty well spilled* (meaning that some secret was out) is fully acceptable.

6. Some idioms become *verbal phrases*, i.e. multi-word verbs. The meaning of some idiomatic verbal constructions can be guessed from the meanings of their parts, e.g. **cut down on** in *We must cut down on expenses* (**cut down on something** =to reduce the amount of something or of doing something). But the meaning of others is metaphorical: e.g. **put down to** in *I put the messy writing down to haste* (**put something down to something** =to attribute the cause of something to something else).

7. A linguistically fascinating fact about idiomatic expressions in English is that some, but not all, of them can undergo the ordinary syntactic processes of the language. For instance, the idiom **let the cat out of the bag** can appear in such sentences as *Several cats were let out of that particularly secret bag*, or *The cat has been well and truly let out of the bag*, where the idiom has been broken up and its parts scattered about the sentence without loss of the idiomatic meaning *to tell someone something that was intended to be secret*. And to Elgin (1983: 35 (cf. Trask, 2007)) all of the following are acceptable in English:

All the scouts hit the hay. The hay was hit by all the scouts. It was the hay that all the scouts hit. (If you **hit the hay/sack**, you go to bed in order to sleep.)

She cut off her nose to spite her face. It was her nose that she cut off to spite her face. What she cut off to spite her face was her nose. (**cut off one's nose to spite one's face** =hurt oneself in trying to take revenge on somebody else)

I think the manager is slightly under the weather. The weather is what I think the manager is slightly under. (If someone is **under the weather** they feel ill.)

Phillip had to bite the bullet. The bullet, Phillip had to bite. What Phillip had to bite was the bullet. The bullet had to be bitten by Phillip. (To bite the bullet is to force yourself to perform an unpleasant or difficult action or to be brave in a difficult situation.)

Such findings pose problems not only of syntax but also of psycholinguistics.

8. The meaning of some idioms is not predictable from the usual grammatical rules of a language. There are idiomatic expressions that seem ill-formed because they do not follow the grammatical rules observable in the language behaviour of native speakers of English, as shown in the following examples:

blow somebody/something to kingdom come =to completely destroy someone or something: *The bombs are capable of blowing/blastng a whole city to kingdom come (=so that it is completely destroyed)* || **(The) devil take the hindmost!** (saying) =let everyone look after his or her own interest, safety, etc.: *I admire the orderly way the British queue up everywhere. Back home we just push and shove, and the devil take the hindmost* || **suffice it to say that ...** =I will say only that ...: *Suffice it to say that (=It suffices to say that) working with Kelvin was not a very pleasant experience* || **easy come, easy go** (saying)¹⁰ =what has been acquired very easily and quickly may be spent, lost, or wasted: *The financial scene looks erratic- easy come, easy go* || **sez/says you** =Nonsense ('sez you' is the more common form) || **by and large** (used when talking generally about someone or something): *By and large (=when everything about my job is considered together) it's very enjoyable* || **put paid to** =to spoil and end your hopes or plans completely: *A car accident put paid to his chances of taking part in the race.*

Trip the light fantastic means to dance: *A lot of the fellows that went to the Saturday night discos spent more time leaning on the wall or drinking in the bar than tripping the light fantastic and so the girls danced with each other, or got fed up and stopped going* || **(all) the world and her husband/his wife** (American: *everyone and his brother*) =a great many people, especially in a particular place at a particular time': *I'd never have gone on holiday that week if I'd known all the world and his wife were going as well.* **How goes it?**¹¹ is used to ask how someone's situation is or how things are developing, especially used as a greeting: *'Hey, Tom, how goes it?' 'Fine.'* (Compare: *How are things going?/How's it going?*). The idiom **the powers that be** means important people who have authority or control over others but whose names and personal details are unknown: *It's up to the powers that be to decide what should be done next.*

9. One of the difficulties in learning English idioms is the lack of suitable materials for teaching them. The use of idioms is avoided in many foreign-language teaching materials; foreign-language learners are exposed to simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary, instead. Very little attention, if any, is paid to equipping the student with the ability to absorb and understand idiomatic expressions.

2.2 Difficulties Involved in Translating Idioms

The structures of English and Arabic are very different from each other. Although in many ways grammatically simple, English does present considerable problems to the Arabic-speaking student. In their attempt to learn English, Iraqi students love to deal with a number of difficulties of which coping with idioms (at the levels of comprehension, production and translation) is not the easiest. The Iraqi student of English is in dire need of a better understanding of a language that is highly idiomatic. Experience shows that Iraqi students learning English as a foreign language are really interested in learning and

translating idiomatic language. Everyday English has always relied heavily on such idioms as (*straight from the horse's mouth*) (=information direct from reliable sources), or *be hard put (to it) to (do something)* (=to have great difficulty (in doing something)). The following are some of the reasons why English idioms are difficult to translate into Arabic.

1. A large number of idiomatic expressions in English look deceptively easy to the Iraqi student at first sight, but their meanings can be radically different from what one might expect, i.e. non-literality. Could an Iraqi student, for example, guess the meaning of the following two idioms from the individual meanings of the words which compose them?: *a dog in the manger* (=a person who does not wish others to enjoy what he cannot use for his own enjoyment) من لا يستعمل شيئاً ولا يدع غيره يستعمله، لا يرحم ولا يدع رحمة الله تنزل على غيره ; *burn the/a candle at both ends* (= to work very early and very late; spend too much time on work or pleasure; get too little rest).

يبذل جهداً عظيماً، يصل الليل بالنهار، في جهد مرهق

The point is here that idioms are a marked example of the non-literal use of language. Translating idioms literally is an act of betrayal which is punishable by condemnation. As has been mentioned above (Abstract and 1.2.1), an idiom is a set expression in which two or more words are syntactically related, but with a semantic function not readily deducible from the other uses of the component words apart from each other. *I wash my hands of you and all your wild ideas!* does not mean that the speaker really performs the action. The idiom phrase *wash one's hands of* means to refuse to be responsible for something anymore, its meaning has nothing to do with *hands* or with *washing* in its literal sense.

ينفض يده من الأمر = يرفض تحمل المسؤولية

To drop a brick/a clanger is to behave indiscreetly: *He dropped a brick in front of the President by calling her 'sir'.* جرح شعوره سهواً ، علق ببغاوة ، يتصرف تصرفاً غير لائق ، تنتقصه اللباقة. If you *go at it hammer and tongs*, you do something very energetically and enthusiastically.

اندفع بكامل القوة والشدة، بحزم وشدة ، بالباع والذراع

To put your foot in it is to say something you should not have: *I really put my foot in it by asking her when the baby was due and she wasn't even pregnant.*

يرتكب خطأً مضحكاً، يقول كلاماً محرّجاً لأحد الحاضرين بدون قصد

The term *white elephant* does not refer to an animal but to a useless object (=a very costly or troublesome possession useless to its owner): *The dam has become something of a white elephant.* نقمة في ثوب نعمة ، شئ جميل ضرره أكثر من نفعه

If someone talks *hot air*, they make statements which sound impressive, but are really meaningless: *Take no notice of him - he talks nothing but hot air.* هراء، كلام في الهواء

The idiom (*as*) *plain as a pikestaff/the nose on one's face* means very obvious or clearly visible. In Arabic, the same meaning can be rendered by the expressions:

واضح كالشمس، واضح كل الوضوح، واضح وضوح الصبح ، أبيض من فلق الصبح ، واضح كالشمس في رابعة النهار

2. Some idiomatic expressions reflect the cultural¹² setting in which they occur. If the cultural settings of the source and target languages are significantly different, there will be instances when the source text will contain collocations which convey what to the target reader would be unfamiliar associations of ideas. *New Castle* is the centre of a major coal-producing area; *to carry/take/bring coals to Newcastle* is to supply goods to a place or a person that already has a lot of those particular goods: *It would be (like) carrying coals to Newcastle if another bank opened in this street: there are three here now.* This idiomatic

expression is culture-specific in the sense that it contains a reference to Newcastle coal and uses it as a measure of abundance. In Arabic, the same meaning can be rendered by the expressions:

بييع الماء في حارة السفانين، ينقل تمرًا إلى هَجَر/البصرة

Exporting pine to Scandinavia /qat to Yemen/oil to Iraq and carrying water to the river seem a bit like *carrying coals to Newcastle*.

Similar examples of 'towns in idioms' in English are seen in the following: *After a successful military campaign throughout Europe, Napoleon Bonaparte was finally defeated at Waterloo* يهزم هزيمة نكراء. If you meet your Waterloo, you come to a similar fate. If someone asks you to do a very difficult job very quickly, you can reply **Rome wasn't built in a day** لم تخلق الدنيا في يوم واحد. If people ignore or avoid an unpopular person, we say that they **send him to Coventry**: *The other workmen have sent him to Coventry because he supported the boss's point of view*. Besides, English often uses the names of other countries in common phrases (= 'nationality idioms'). If two or more people at a restaurant or pub **go Dutch**, they all pay for themselves. If you cannot make sense of written instructions, you say **it's all Greek to me**: *He tried to explain how a calculating machine worked, but it was all Greek to me* غير مفهوم، غامض. If warm, dry weather continues into autumn, it's **an Indian summer**. **Dutch courage** (American: **liquid courage**) is courage induced by drink: *I'd had four drinks and hoped that my Dutch courage would help me tell my wife what had happened* شجاعة السكران.

A Mexican wave (American: **the wave**) is a movement made by a large group of people, especially while watching a sports game, standing up and lifting up their arms and then sitting down, one after another, so producing a wave-like effect (*Come on. Let's do the wave*). **Russian roulette** is a lethal game of chance in which people shoot themselves with a gun that can hold six bullets but has only one in it, so that they do not know if they will be killed (*Longman Advanced American Dictionary*, 2000).

An Iraqi learner of English is thus required not just to translate idiomatic expressions but also interpret their meaning in terms of his/her own culture.

3. Iraqi students tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings, of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture -both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives. In English, **a cat has nine lives**¹³, whereas in Arabic it has **seven**. أعمارُ للهرة تسع أرواح، من حيَّةٍ ٧ /نسر

In Arabic, **a bird in the hand is worth ten** -rather than two- **in the bush** عصفور في اليد خير من عشرة على الشجرة، and two **opinions** rather than two/many **heads** are better than one (also: **Four eyes see more** (or **better**) **than two**). ما خاب من استشارة، رأيان خير من رأي واحد.

We also say **in the nose of** (***in the nose of**) rather than **in the teeth of** to mean in spite of opposition or danger from something رغم أنفه. Someone who has **second sight** is thought to have an unusual natural ability to know without being told what will happen in the future or what is happening in a different place: *I once met a woman with second sight who told me I was about to lose my job, and I did the very next day*. In Arabic, the supposed ability to see or speak about future events before they happen is referred to as **الحاسة السادسة** (literally: the **sixth** sense, not **second** sight).

4. Another reason why idioms are difficult to translate is that an idiomatic expression cannot be directly translated -because a match cannot be found in the target language or because it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target language on account of differences in stylistic preferences of the source language and the target language. If the idiomatic expressions cannot be directly translated, a non-idiomatic or plain prose translation may be used. *A straw in the wind* is something that suggests what might happen. إشارة يمكن بمقتضاها التنبؤ بتطورات الأحداث

Get (hold of) the wrong end of the stick is to misunderstand completely what has been said.

يفهم فهما خاطئا أو معكوسا، يفهم الأمر بالمقلوب، يسيء فهم ما يقال له أو يحمله محمل السوء

The idiomatic expression *There are plenty more fish in the sea* is used to tell someone whose relationship has ended that there are other people they can have a relationship with.

ان قفائك سمكة وسمك البحر كثير(تقال للتخفيف عن فقد حبيبته) (= خيرها بغيرها)

A square peg in a round hole is a person unsuited to the position he fills.

شخص غير مؤهل للوظيفة المسندة اليه = البغل في الإبريق، شئ أو شخص غير مناسب للمكان الذي وضع فيه

Jobs for the boys is work which is given by someone in an important position to their friends or relatives. خلق اعمال ومناصب لتوظيف الأصدقاء والمحاسيب، تحيز، محاباة، محسوبية.

A Job's comforter (which literally renders (معزّي آيوب) is somebody who perhaps means to sympathize with a depressed or unhappy person but who depresses him/her further by pointing out the hopelessness of his/her case, that worse may still be to come, etc.

معزّي يزيد أشجان المحزون ، من يحاول تعزية المرء ومواساته فلا يزيده إلا لوعة وأسى

The English expression *sauce for the goose* (originally a proverb: *What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander*) means if one person is allowed to behave in a particular way, then another person can behave in that way too. This idiomatic expression, though culture-specific in the sense that it contains a reference to *goose* and *gander*, is nevertheless closely paralleled in Arabic by ما صلح لزيد يصلح لعمرىو.

Sometimes the meaning of an idiom can be figured out because the idiom is *transparent*, i.e. that can be extrapolated from surface structure. Some idioms are really *dead* or *frozen* metaphors, and their meaning is metaphorically transparent e.g. *hit the (right) nail on the head* (=to say or do the right thing; give the true explanation) يصيب كبد الحقيقة أو الأمر أو *cry over spilt milk* =to cry or grieve because of a loss or error for which there is no remedy: يبكي على اللبن المهرق/المراق ، يأسى على مضيّع لا سبيل إلى استرجاعه: *The coast is clear* is used to say that there is no obstacle or danger in the way الطريق أمن. On the other hand, idiomatic expressions such as those cited below would be very difficult to figure out if their meanings were not known: *eat his words* =to admit that one was wrong يعتذر ، يسحب *have green fingers* (also: *have a green thumb*) =to have the ability to grow plants and flowers: (يده خضراء ، لديه موهبة في أمور الزراعة والفلاحة) *a hot potato* (=something difficult or dangerous to deal with): (لخبر أو لشخص خطر)(إنه) بلاء أزرق

An idiom in the source language may have a very close counterpart in the target language (in the sense that both idioms consist of equivalent lexical items) but has a totally or partially different meaning. If someone *pulls your leg*, they deceive you in a way that is intended to be humorous: *stop pulling my leg –you haven't been having lunch with the President (pull one's leg* =to tease يخدع 'يلف'، يلعب أو يضحك على، يمزح، يداعب. This is identical on the surface to the Arabic idiomatic expression يسحب رجله (literally: *pull his leg*, which is used in several Arabic dialects to mean tricking somebody into letting the cat out of the bag, spilling the beans, or blowing the gaff, i.e. persuading someone into letting out

a secret: *بيو لسانه يسرقه في الكلام، يستدرجه الى الكلام* (literally: *to steal one's tongue*). Instances of idioms which look similar or identical in both the source language and the target language may have a totally or partially different meaning. These may tempt the unwary translator who is not very familiar with the source-language idiom into falling in the trap of imposing a target-language interpretation on it. Therefore, the learners of a foreign language should always be enabled to shake off the source language influence.

2.3 Literal vs. Figurative Meaning

There are, in English, a good number of idioms which may be used in both their literal and idiomatic senses at the same time. Comparing and contrasting literal and figurative meanings of a given sequence of words will enable students to recognize idiomatic usage and to interpret idioms accordingly. The following telephone conversations each involve a literal misinterpretation of idioms:

1) - Edwin: I'll **give you a ring** later in the week.

- Jane: But my parents want to marry me to a rich man.

2) - Tom: I have been having lunch with the President.

- Mary: Stop **pulling my leg**.

- Tom: How can I pull your leg? I'm sitting too far away from you to be able to pull your leg.

The misinterpretation occurred because there is skillful manipulation of literal and idiomatic meanings. The phrase **give somebody a ring** is open to two interpretations: *to make a telephone call to someone*, and *to give somebody a piece of jewellery usually worn on a finger*. In its idiomatic use, **pull somebody's leg** (informal) means *make fun of somebody, especially by making him believe something that is untrue*. A literal interpretation of *pull somebody's leg* seems also plausible in a given context. We may also consider the two phrases **spill the beans** and **kick the bucket**. These may be used in a literal context or they may be used idiomatically. We may say, literally, *Mary spilt the beans on the floor* and *Mary opened the tin of beans and spilt them on the floor*. In *Someone spilt the beans about Rick's surprise party*, however, *spilt the beans* is not at all connected with beans; **to spill the beans** means *to tell something that is secret*. So, too, the meaning of the phrase **kick the bucket** can, in the literal sense of striking one's foot against a pail, be arrived at by a summation of the meaning of the constituent words, but in the idiomatic sense of dying it cannot (although *kick the bucket* contains little that would suggest dying). The verb is variable for subject and for tense as is the verb *die*, but otherwise the phrase is set; we do not have the leeway that we have in the literal sense to say *kick the pail*, *kick this bucket*, *kick the blue bucket*, and so on. Thus, the three words *kick*, *the*, and *bucket* used idiomatically must, from a functional point of view, be regarded as single unit, for this unit fulfils the same function as the single word *die*.

He almost bought the farm can be a literal expression, meaning, for example, *He almost purchased some land for farming*. In this case, *the farm* can be replaced by a pronoun: *He almost bought it*, or the verb can be used in the passive form: *The farm was almost bought*. However, *He almost bought the farm* can also be a fixed idiomatic expression meaning *He almost died*. When this expression is used as an idiom, no word changes are possible. The idiom **shut the door in someone's face** may mean **a)** (literally) not to allow someone to enter: *She shut/closed the garage door in my face and headed to the house*, or **b)** to refuse

to listen to or deal with someone: *We offered the management a compromise but they just shut the door in our face.*

Often a verbal combination (e.g. *a verb plus an adverb particle*) can have both a normal meaning and an idiomatic meaning, for example, *hold up*, as shown in (a) and (b) below:

a) *Hold up your right hand and repeat these words after me (hold up (literally) =raise something);* **b)** *The criminals held up the train and stole all the passenger's money (hold up (idiom) =to stop (a vehicle) by force in order to rob).* The verbal phrase *put up* as used in **a)** *They're having a memorial put up to him by public subscription* is not idiomatic, whereas *put up* in **b)** *A well-wisher had put up the money (for the scheme)* is idiomatic (*put up money/\$5000/\$5 million =to give an amount of money for a particular purpose*).

So, too, the following examples each contain expressions which have both idiomatic meaning (*a*-sentences) and literal meaning (*b*-sentences).

1a) *The red carpet* is a special official welcome that is given to an important guest, especially in which a long red floor covering is put down for them to walk on: *We'll roll out the red carpet when the President comes.* يفرش له البساط الأحمر.

1b) *You'll need some stain remover to get rid of that ink on the red carpet.*

2a) *On the carpet* is open to two interpretations, as follows:

i) *Patrick was on the carpet (=in trouble with someone in authority) for crashing a company car that he hadn't even asked permission to use.* موضع التوبيخ واللوم.

ii) *The plans have been on the carpet for a year now, but no decision has been reached.*

على بساط البحث، قيد البحث

2b) *The police found blood stains on the carpet.*

3a) *In the cart*¹⁴ means in an awkward or difficult position; in danger, disgrace or difficulty: *My wife's behaviour at the office party put me in the cart at work.*

3b) *The hay/rubbish is in the cart.*

4a) Something can be described as *the limit* if it is so annoying or inconvenient that it is impossible to bear: *And now you're cutting your toenails in bed! – that really is the limit.*

بلغ السيل الزبي المصيبة الكبرى، آخر ما كان ينتظر

4b) *What's the limit on how many bottles of wine you can bring through customs?*

المسموح به

5a) *Next door to* means *almost/not far from*:

If you're asked to resign from your job, it's next door to (=nearly the same as) being fired.

5b) *in the house or flat next to (somebody/something):* لبيت المجاور

Those people next door to us (=living in the house beside ours) are a bit odd.

6a) *Take somebody for a ride* is to deceive or swindle somebody: *The car-salesman took me for a ride.* يخدع، يغش

6b) *He took me for a ride in his new car.*

7a) *Go west* means **i.** (of people) to die (*تغرب شمسها، يموت*); **ii.** (of things) to be damaged or ruined (*يبتدر، يعطب*): *My new typewriter has gone west after only two months.*

7b) toward the west: *Go west on I-80 toward Denver • Go west, young man.*¹⁵

8a) *A close shave* is a narrow escape from collision or accident: *I had a close shave this morning. Some idiot in a car almost knocked me off my bike.*

ت النجاة منه في آخر لحظة، نجاة بأعجوبة أو معجزة

8b) a shave that cuts a man's face close to his face: *He badly needed a shower and a close shave.*

9a) *Pour/throw cold water on something* is to be discouraging or unenthusiastic about something: *He threw cold water on the proposals.*

يقط من أهمية الاقتراحات ، يبرد الهمة () ، يثبط عزيمة شخص ما

9b) *They threw cold water on the fire that broke out in the kitchens of the hotel.* يسكب عليه

10a) If you are *in the soup*, you are in an unpleasant or difficult situation: *If your Mum finds out what you've done, you'll really be in the soup!*

10b) *It was in the soup that I found a hair.*

11a) *Pay (a) tribute to somebody/something* means to express one's admiration or respect for somebody/something: *The minister paid tribute to (=praised and thanked) the men who had fought the blaze, saying their bravery had saved countless lives.* يقدر أو يعترف بفضل

11b) *tribute* (in the phrase *pay tribute*) is a payment of goods or money by one ruler or country to another more powerful one, especially to avoid war; *pay tribute: Many conquered nations had to pay tribute to the rulers of ancient Rome.* يدفع جزية

12a) *Drain the radiator* is a special idiom used by CB¹⁶ drivers which means to go to the toilet: *He had left the meeting to drain the radiator.*

12b) In the context of trucks, motorways, and stopping at a service station, however, a literal interpretation of the expression seems highly plausible: *Keith drained the radiator of the car's cooling system.*

13a) *Fall asleep* means to die: *My mother fell asleep of cancer when I was ten years old.* • *He fell asleep in his sleep.* (=while he was sleeping) يموت

13b) *Her three-year-old son fell asleep while we talked* • *He was so tired he fell asleep sitting in his chair.*

14a) *(come) Rain or shine* means whatever happens: *We'll be thinking about you, rain or shine.*

مهما حدث

14b) whatever the weather is like: *Claudia runs five miles every morning (come) rain or shine.*

مهما كان الطقس، سواء كان الجو مطرا أم صحوا

III. Some Pedagogical Recommendations And Suggestions About Idioms

Idioms are essential to English learners when they want to speak or write naturally. The above discussion may lead us to make a number of recommendations and suggestions in relation to the purposes of the research. When teaching idioms, the following should be taken into consideration.

1. Teachers should make students aware of idioms; they should present idiomatic expressions as they would present individual words.
2. Students need to know that learning idioms is crucial for learning English, and noticing idioms is an important stage in learning. They should also need to know how to use idioms, which makes it necessary to know about their idiomatic field and contexts in which they are used.

3. Idiomatic expressions that do not present special problems with vocabulary and grammar should be taught first. Teachers should choose expressions with transparent figurative meanings; transparent idioms are relatively easy to understand and translate.

4. Teachers can easily resort to teaching idioms in isolation as well. This kind of teaching, however, is no better than teaching single words in isolation. Unless students are taught in context-based classes, idioms will not make sense to learners, and meaningful learning will probably not take place.

5. Students should be made aware of the fact that idiomatic usage means using words and phrases in the forms commonly used whether or not these forms appear to be the only logical ones. Students of English say that a person eats *like a pig* to mean *greedily*, or *like a bird* to mean *not very much*. A language learner also says that *someone has an eagle eye/is eagle-/hawk-eyed* to mean that they are keen-sighted, e.g. *The error was caught by an eagle-eyed bank employee*.

Idiomatic expressions like *throw up*, *go up*, *catch on* are part of the common coin of everyday colloquial exchange, and the tendency, especially in casual or in formal contexts, to prefer the word-group idioms to its one-word equivalent - *vomit*, *increase*, *understand*, respectively - helps to explain the widely held view that idioms such as these are among the most characteristically 'English' elements in the general vocabulary: *The baby tried to eat a biscuit and threw up*. *The price of gas has gone up twenty cents since August*. *Do you mind repeating what you said, I didn't quite catch on?* Although such expressions are in common use, their meanings are not always self-evident: an Iraqi learner of English would surely understand *vomit* more readily than *throw up*, while a native speaker might have difficulty in explaining the sense of the combination in terms of its constituent elements (see Alice, 1992).

6. The texts offered for translation (as an in-class activity or homework) should contain idiomatic expressions. Students should be given ample opportunity to practice using and translating idioms correctly - those idioms that students encounter in reading, conversations, etc. When possible, the teaching of idioms should be simplified by using contrastive analysis of idiomatic expressions. Comparing idioms in the first and second languages will enable students to discover which idioms are identical, which are similar, and which are different. In that way, positive transfer can be utilized and interference avoided. English idioms with direct Arabic equivalents sometimes do not have to be overemphasized. Identical idioms in English that have exact idiomatic Arabic equivalents may be taught first. This is because an idiom that is identical to one in the learner's first language will be easy to translate. In English and Arabic many idiomatic expressions are identical. People who *wash their dirty linen in public* discuss, or allow to be discussed in public, matters which should be kept private. ينشر غسيله القذر، يكشف سيئاته للملأ

Put the cart before the horse means reverse the logical order of things, e.g. by saying that the result of something is what caused it. يضع ا

People who *fish in troubled waters* try to get an advantage for themselves from a difficult situation. بصطاد في الماء العكر

If you *pull the carpet/rug from under someone*, you stop them doing what they were planning to do. يسحب البساط من تحت قدميه

If you *put somebody in the picture*, you give someone the information they need to understand: *Alfred here can put you in the picture about how we run the hotel*. يضع فلانا في

To bite the hand that feeds you is to act badly towards the person who is helping or has helped you. يعرض اليد التي أطعمته = يسيئ إلى من أحسن إليه

Both English and Arabic have the idiom **a rough diamond** () which has the same meaning in both languages: *a rough diamond* is a person who is kinder and more pleasant than they seem to be from their appearance and manner. شخص فظ لكنه طيب القلب

If you **twist someone's arm** you make it very difficult for them to refuse to do something. يلوي ذراع () ، يرغمه بالحيلة أو بالقوة على القيام بعمل ما

The last straw (that breaks the camel's back) is an addition to a set of troubles which makes them at last too much to bear: *She's always been rude to me, but it was the last straw when she started insulting my mother.* القشة التي قصمت ظهر البعير

A few more examples may be useful here:

History repeats itself التاريخ يعيد نفسه ، ما أشبه الليلة بالبارحة || **lose one's temper** يغضب ، يفقد الكرة في **The ball is in your court** || صبر أيوب **the patience of Job** || يضيق ذرعا

A love at first sight || الحب أعمى **Love is blind** || التماسيح (=insincere sorrow) **crocodile tears** || الحب من أول نظرة **(a case of) the blind leading the blind** (=people with little

information advising people with even less **the lion's share** حصصة الأسد **the lion's share** . So too, a literal interpretation of the idiomatic expression **a paper tiger** (=something, such as an enemy or foreign country, that seems very strong and very dangerous, but is really weak and harmless) seems highly plausible:

= أي شخص أو شيء مظهره مخيف ومخبره ضعيف عدو يظن بأنه قوي وهو الحقيقة ضعيف

The above examples clearly show that in both English and Arabic many idioms are identical, consisting of equivalent lexical items and conveying the same meaning. Comparing idioms in the first and second languages can also point out those idioms which are very similar but not exactly the same, and are, therefore, likely to cause problems. The idiomatic expression **not have a red cent** (also: *without a red cent*) means to have no money at all; be extremely poor: *I'm sorry, I can't lend you anything – I haven't got a red cent.* This idiom phrase conveys what, in Arabic, must be translated as **لا أملك شروى نقير** (literally:). The **evil eye** (in the phrase **give somebody the evil eye** =to look at someone in an unpleasant way, especially because you are angry with them) translates **العين**

استهجان = : *Members of the government gave the politician the evil eye when he voted against the government's plans.*

On the other hand, the following examples show that it is often possible to find an idiom in the target language which has a meaning similar to that of the source idiom, but which consists of different lexical items (i.e. using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form). The English idiomatic expression **beat/flog a dead horse** and the Arabic expressions **يضرب في حديد بارد** use different lexical items to express more or less the same idea, namely, to waste one's energies. So too, the idiom phrase **to add fuel to the fire/flames** and **يزيد النار اشتعالا، يصب الزيت على النار** (= زاد في الطين بل) express the same idea: to make a bad situation worse. **Pigs might fly** (used to express disbelief) means miracles may happen but they are extremely unlikely: **قد يبيض الديك وتصبح** (قد تحدث العجائب =)

Know which side one's bread is buttered means to know where one may have advantages, where one's interest lies. يعرف من أين توكل الكتف

A burnt child dreads the fire is closely paralleled in Arabic by **لا يلدغ المؤمن من جحر مرتين** or **الملدوغ يخاف**

To lock the stable door after the horse has bolted means to be so late in taking action to prevent something bad happening that the bad event has already happened:

سبق السيف العذل ، لا ينفع الندم بعد العدم، فات أوان الحذر، لات ساعة مندم

Wine, woman and song is the pleasant life that represents the supposed usual enjoyment of men: *His youth was spent in having a good time – plenty of wine, women, and song.*

الماء والخضراء والوجه الحسن

Put in one's two cents' worth (also: **put in one's oar**) is to add one's comments or opinion: *Do you mind if I put in my two cents' worth? I have a suggestion.* بين الدلاء ، أدلى بدلوه

Teachers should place a special emphasis on dissimilar idioms in English and Arabic, i.e. English idioms that have no Arabic idiomatic equivalents. For example, **get/give a thick ear** (=to receive or give a blow on the ear causing it to swell as a punishment (especially used in threats)) and **يلطم** have the same semantic content: *I'll give you a thick ear if you get home late again.* **For better or (for) worse** (also: *through thick and thin; in good and bad days*) means whatever happens; even if there are difficulties: *I'm so grateful to Mary – she's supported me through thick and thin.* أيأ كانت الظروف ، في المراء والضراء. The sentence idiom **The die is cast/throw**¹⁷ is used to say that an event or decision cannot now be changed and will have an important effect on the future: *It was too late to back out of the project – the die was already cast.* سبق السيف العذل ، قضي الأمر ، نفذ السهم ، حم القضاء

So, too, the idiomatic expressions **in the teeth of** and **ride the/a tiger** should be emphasized because their Arabic equivalents will mislead Iraqi learners to use ***in the nose of** (رغم أنفه) and (***ride the/a danger**) يركب المخاطر , respectively. (Compare: *ride a wave* =to surf.)

7. The idioms we ask our students to learn and translate should obviously be those with high frequency of occurrence in ordinary reading and conversation. Unfortunately, no frequency lists of English idioms exist, so judgments must be subjective. However it is not too difficult to determine that idioms like those in (A) below are used much more frequently than idioms such as those in (B):

(A): **(from) A to Z** (=from beginning to end; describing, including, or knowing everything about a subject) من الألف إلى الياء *He knows the subject from A to Z • The book is an A to Z of French cooking a chicken and egg situation/problem/thing/dilemma etc.* (=a situation in which it is impossible to decide which of two things happened first, or which action is the cause of the other) **الدجاجة من البيضة أم البيضة من الدجاجة** **last but not least** (used when mentioning the last person or thing in a list, to emphasize that they are still important) **أخيراً وليس آخراً** **on the safe side** (=taking no risks): *Just to be on the safe side, drink bottled water.* زيادة في الإطمئنان

(B): **give somebody the elbow** (=to tell someone that you do not like them or want them to work for you anymore, and that they should leave) يتخلص من، يفصم علاقته بـ
turn a blind eye (to) (=to pretend not to see or notice (something, especially something illegal)) يغض النظر أو الطرف

make one's mark (on) (=to gain success, fame, etc, (in) by showing one's best qualities) يثبت وجوده وتفوقه، يكون له شأن

know the ropes (=to know from experience the rules and customs in some place or activity)

يعرف الأصول كلها

8. Generally speaking, the more difficult an expression is to understand and the less sense it makes in a given context, the more likely a foreign-language learner will recognize it as an idiom. Idiomatic expressions do not make sense if interpreted literally. The translation of idioms is the field where literal translation is condemned. If **all hell breaks loose**, a situation suddenly becomes violent and noisy, especially with people arguing or fighting: *At the announcement of more tax increases all hell broke loose in Parliament* يحدث هرج ،
 به جهنم . If you **go/run/ ride, etc. hell for leather**, you go or travel as fast as you can: *I was half an hour late for work, and I rode hell for leather down the hill.*

بسرعة البرق الخاطف، بأسرع ما يمكن، بسرعة جنونية

One of the most frequent criticisms of translation is that *it does not sound natural*. This is because the translator's thoughts and choice of words are too strongly moulded by his first language. Learners should, therefore, be enabled to shake off their first language influence; this will help them realize the absurdity of literal meanings and avoid producing incorrect or often comical translations of idiomatic expressions. An Iraqi student of English will not make a good impression on a native speaker of English if he tells him/her that he/she is (literally) *rare currency/hard currency* صعبة، عملة نادرة، i.e. he/she is at a premium (if somebody (figuratively) is **at a premium**, they are highly valued or esteemed: *Skilled workers are at a premium in this town*. If something is **at a premium**, it is not common and is, therefore valuable: *Hotel rooms are at a premium during the holiday months*. The idiom **get into/be in hot water** means *to get into/be in a difficult situation* ; it cannot be rendered literally in Arabic as **في ماء حار** (hot water =
 =
). Teachers should make their students aware of the fact that it is completely absurd to translate literally into Arabic idioms like those above and the ones below: **It's raining cats and dogs** (=It's raining very hard/heavily)

هطل المطر بغزارة. and **The rain came down in buckets/sheets** (=in great amounts).

Hotfoot is an adverb meaning very fast and in a hurry: *We ran hotfoot to find out the news.*
 بغير إبطاء،

To kick the bucket (American: *kick off*) is to die: *It's only been about a month since Joe kicked off/kicked the bucket.* يموت

Hot seat means the electrical chair in which murderers are put to death in parts of the US.
 الكرسي الكه

9. Idiomatic expressions are notoriously difficult to translate. As a general rule, if a suitable idiom in one's own language does not readily spring to mind, one gives a straightforward translation of the meaning: **teething troubles/problems** are problems which happen in the early stages of doing something new: *There were the usual teething troubles at the start of the project, but that's to be expected.* متاعب التسنين: متاعب تواجهه في بداية كل مشروع
Indian summer is a period of dry, hazy weather in late autumn **فترة جو دافئ في** الصيف الهندي
Indian summer is also a pleasant or successful time nearly at the end of a particular period, such as the end of someone's life: *the Indian summer of czarist Russia.*
 فترة هدوء أو سعادة أو ازدهار تقع قبيل انتهاء شيء ما

10. It is probably not worthwhile to ask foreign-language learners to translate colloquial or slangy idiomatic expressions such as **hell-bent** (adjective) =completely determined to do something, without considering dangers: *Carlos is hell-bent on climbing that mountain* **bet one's boots/shirt/ass/bottom dollar** =to be certain: *You can bet your boots that he'll get there before anyone else* **don't sweat it** =used to tell someone not to worry about something: *Don't sweat it – you'll pass the test, no problem* **get someone's number**

=to understand a person's true character or intentions, especially to realize his faults, weakness, or dishonesty: *I used to think he was a friend of mine, but now I've got his number; he's completely selfish He kicked the habit* (=to give up or break (a drug addiction). These idiom phrases are not likely to be used at all by Iraqi students learning English as a foreign language; they may be *picked up* (=understood) only by those who find them useful.

11. When teaching idioms, teachers cannot ignore reading and listening skills, which help students notice idioms. Writing and speaking skills, on the other hand, give learners the opportunity to practice idioms.

12. Training students to infer meaning from context and to deal with figurative speech enables them to generalize beyond those idioms which they have learned and to understand idioms which they have never encountered before (Adkins, 1968). Students should also be enabled to achieve sensitivity for judging when and how an idiom can be manipulated. A part of an idiom may be separated from the rest by a syntactic process (*idiom chunk*). For example, in *The beans were by then pretty well spilled* (meaning *that some secret was out*) *the beans* is a detached chunk of the idiom *spill the beans*.

13. There is a definite need for teaching strategies that help learners deal with idioms at both the comprehension and production levels. One of the difficulties in learning English idioms is the lack of suitable materials for teaching them. Learning to understand and produce idioms is, or should be, an integral part of vocabulary learning in a foreign language. Although a foreign-language learner's competence in actively using the idioms hardly ever matches that of a native speaker, students should be given ample opportunity to practice using idiomatic language correctly. Students should have both general and idiom dictionaries at their disposal. These are useful sources of information about idiomatic expressions in the language, and can be of great help in drawing students' attention to idioms. To encourage student autonomy, students should be encouraged to do dictionary work to find certain idioms. General dictionaries, special dictionaries as well as learners' dictionaries should be at the learner's elbow (see References: Dictionaries.)

14. When translating, remember that word play in one language cannot often be properly conveyed in another. Aim to be natural rather than clever. Translate the meaning rather than the words. Foreign-language learners who have a phobia about idiomatic language should be helped not only to overcome but also to shake off their *idiom-phobia*. Fernando and Flavell (1981) discuss the difference in rhetorical effect of using idioms in general and of using specific types of idiom in the source and target languages and quite rightly conclude that "Translation is an exacting art. Idiom more than any other feature of language demands that the translator be not only accurate but highly sensitive to the rhetorical nuances of the language."(p.85)

IV. Activities To Practice Idiomatic Expressions

Idioms play an important part in English and it is vital for students to understand them and to be able to use them. This is not easy, as idioms carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. They are metaphorical rather than literal. In teaching idioms, the teacher has to choose, out of the thousands in the language, those that are today in most frequent use. Teachers of English need to be creative and innovative. The activities below make idiom learning enjoyable and enable students to develop sensitivity

toward the language. They also enable them to demonstrate the optimal use of different learning techniques and participate actively in their learning.

When students understand idiomatic expressions and use them in real situations, they can communicate better. Materials designed specifically to teach idioms should provide exercises to help Iraqi students master idiomatic language. There is a definite need for varied exercises to help them deal with both comprehension and production of idioms. The following are activities to raise students' awareness of idioms and practice them. They give an idea of the range of techniques open to the teacher. These exercises can be done either at home or in the classroom.

Exercise 1 Answer the following statements True or False.

1. The idiom *read the riot act* in the sentence *Stephanie read Ted the riot act for seeing his old girlfriend means scolded severely.*
2. The idioms *kick the bucket*, *give up the ghost*, *go west*, *kick off*, *pay the debt of nature*/*pay one's debt to nature* have the same meaning.
3. The idioms *make both ends meet*, *give up the ghost* and *meat one's maker* can be used interchangeably.

Exercise 2 Circle the option that best completes the following sentences.

1. *Fly off the handle* is an English idiom meaning -----.
a) to be sensible b) to scold severely c) to lose one's temper d) to run as fast as possible
2. I immediately ----- and wanted to prove him wrong.
a) lived it up b) saw red c) pushed the boat out d) saw the light
3. Did you ----- that money honestly?
a) come by b) come on c) come off d) come in

Exercise 3 Choose the correct answer.

1. The idiomatic expression *be in somebody's shoes* in *If I were in your shoes, I'd ask for a divorce* means:
a. to get into a difficult situation by doing something wrong
b. to be in someone else's situation
c. to be in a situation in which someone is annoyed with you because you have done something wrong
d. to be in the opposite situation.
2. What does the following mean? *'When he gave up running he said it was because his heart just wasn't in it anymore'.*
a. He felt ill. b. He felt bored and not interested
c. He wanted to move away. d. He wanted to do something else.

Exercise 4 Complete the following with the correct colour word.

1. The state is already \$3 billion in the ----- . Answer: *red* (*be in the red* =in debt)
2. He was left with \$20,000. For the first time in months he was in the ----- at the bank.

Answer: *black* (be in the black =not in debt)

3. Symptoms of the disease often appear out of the ----- . Answer: *blue* (out of the blue =suddenly and without warning)
4. She has always had ----- fingers, so it is not surprising that they have a beautiful garden. Answer: *green* (have green fingers =to be good at making plants grow)
5. Shooting at an animal that has just come out of a cage is ----- -bellied. Answer: *yellow* (yellow-bellied =cowardly)

Exercise 5 Each sentence below has a word missing. Draw a line (/) to show where the word should go and write the missing word in the blank on the right.

1. Adam was in hot over his job performance. (Answer: Adam was in hot /over his job performance. water (be in hot water =to be in a difficult situation because you have done something wrong)
2. I was half an hour late for work, and I went hell for down the hill. (Answer: I was half an hour late for work, and I went hell for/ down the hill. leather (go/run/ride/cycle hell for leather =to move at great speed)

Exercise 6 Complete the sentences below, using an idiom which means the same as the word or words in italics. *put off* *call off* *let off*

1. The judge gave the thief a warning and _____ him _____. The thief was amazed that he *wasn't punished*.
2. Mr. Asano asked if they could _____ the meeting _____ until Friday. The committee agreed and so the meeting was *postponed*.
3. The players wanted to _____ the match _____ but the manager refused. However, as the storm got worse he finally decided to *cancel* it.

Exercise 7 Match the following (number to letter).

List A

1. lose 2. do one's level 3. drive one's pigs to 4. have a finger in every 5. silence is

List B

- a. pie b. golden c. best d. heart e. market

List A

1. empty-handed 2. It's too late 3. He is unsurpassable 4. very famous
5. to accomplish nothing, fail, be unsuccessful 6. to die, pass away, kick off
7. neither here nor there 8. a storm in a teacup 9. that does/did it

List B

- a. لا يشق له غبار b. أشهر من نار على علم c. بلغ السيل الزبى d. لا في العير ولا في النفير
e. صفر اليبدين f. رجع بخفي حنين g. سبق السيف العذل h. انتقل إلى جوار ربه i.

Exercise 8 Join number (idiom) to letter (meaning).

1. pop the question 2. fish in troubled waters 3. gird (up) your loins 4. like a cat on hot bricks
- a. to try to win advantage for oneself from a disturbed state of affairs
 b. very nervous or worried
 c. to get ready to do something, especially to fight
 d. to ask someone to marry you

Exercise 9 Join these split sentences (number to letter).

1. We booked a holiday chalet we saw advertised in a newspaper –
 2. It was only a joke –
 3. I'm girding up my loins –
- a. buying a pig in a poke, I suppose, but it turned out all right.
 b. for battle on this tax issue.
 c. keep your shirt on

Exercise 10 Match the italicized idioms in sentences a-d below with the sentences in 1-4.

1. *Let sleeping dogs lie.* Why bring the whole thing up again?
 2. Yes. I'll stay for another hour. *I may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.*
 3. The chief inspector likes to *play cat and mouse* with his suspects.
 4. He's really greedy. *He always makes sure that he has the lion's share.*
- a. If the punishment is going to be equally bad for both bad and very bad behaviour, I'll behave very badly
 b. ... he has the largest part of something.
 c. Leave things as they are if by mentioning them again you are likely to cause problems.
 d. He likes teasing people.

Exercise 11 Re-write the sentences below, replacing the words in italics with the most suitable idioms from the list.

long in the tooth / *give him the elbow* / *has a sweet tooth* / *call up* / *fall asleep*

1. He was very sick and we knew he might *die*.
 2. David's going to *telephone* Mary tonight.
 3. I'm getting tired of my boyfriend.' - 'Well, why don't you *get rid of him then?*'
 4. Poor old chap! He's *getting old*. He must be nearly seventy.
 5. My wife is fond of chocolates. She *is fond of sweet things*.

Exercise 12 Provide idiomatic synonyms for the following words and phrases which are paraphrases of idioms:

tease somebody; deceive; looking very unhappy; from a first-hand source

(Answer: *pull somebody's leg; pull the wool over somebody's eyes; down in the mouth; from the horse's mouth*, respectively)

Exercise 13 Say which of the following idiomatic expressions in italics are used correctly and correct those which are wrong.

1. That will really *sort out the sheep from the goats*. (incorrect: *separate* instead of *sort out*)

2. ***Pull up your horses!*** I'd like to tell you something before you go. (incorrect: *hold* instead of *pull up*)
3. A farmer's life is not ***all cakes and ale***. (correct)
4. It is ***raining dogs and cats***. (incorrect: *It's raining cats and dogs*.)
5. ***When the cat's away, the birds will play***. (incorrect: *mice* instead of *birds*)
6. ***She has let the kitten out of the bag*** about the government's true intentions. (incorrect: *cat* instead of *kitten*)
7. ***A cat has nine lives***. (correct)

Exercise 14 Re-write the story¹⁸ below, replacing the words in italics with the most suitable multi-word verbs from the list.

- a. *fell out* b. *warmed to/took to/fell for* c. *taken to/got on with* d. *struck up*
 e. *cut up* f. *put...down* g. *get on well* h. *take to/warm to/fall for*

Tom and I used to *be very friendly* with each other, but then Tom *quarreled with* Anna. Tom had never *liked* Anna, and he started to *criticize* her whenever he was with me. Eventually Tom and I *quarreled*, too. Some time later, however, Tom slowly *began to like* Anna and she also began to *feel a liking for* him. They soon *formed* a close friendship, and Anna stopped seeing me. I now feel very *upset* about the whole matter.

Exercise 15 Match the sentences with the pictures.

1. A young man is ***making off with*** lady's handbag.
 2. She ***made a real pig of herself!***
 3. ***The old man was very sick and we knew he might fall asleep/ kick the bucket, kick off.***
 4. It is ***raining cats and dogs***.
 5. The old man ***dropped off*** while watching television.
- a. a picture of someone who died because they had an illness
 - b. a picture of a heavy rain
 - c. a picture of someone who stole a lady's handbag out of the car
 - d. a picture of a girl who ate all the molasses cookies!
 - e. a picture of an old man who fell asleep while watching television

Exercise 16 Explain the italicized prepositional phrasal verbs in the sentences below.

1. Most countries ***did away with*** slavery long ago. (*do away with someone or something* =to get rid of someone or something)
2. Is Mary ***going in for*** this competition?(*go in for something* =to enjoy doing something; to be fond of something)
3. The Ministry's new plan ***came in for*** a lot of criticism. (*come in for something* =to be eligible for something; to be due something)
4. I intended to write but I never ***got round to*** it. I had no time. (*get round to* =to find time, or have the time, for (something or doing something))

Exercise 17 Explain the italicized idioms in the sentences below.

1. You're going to fail the exam if you don't *pull your socks up*. (Answer: *make an effort*)
2. She really *put the cat among the pigeons* with her comments about our system of government.

(Answer: **to put/set the cat among the pigeons** =to cause trouble, especially by doing or saying something that is unexpected or causes confusion)

3. I can't trust her to do anything when she is alone because she worries and *gets her knickers in*

a twist about the smallest thing. (Answer: **get/have one's knickers in a twist** =to become angry or confused)

4. *That does/did it!* This is the third time in a week that the electricity supply has been cut off.

(Answer: to show one's annoyance or anger, especially after several bad or unfortunate events

=that is the end; I won't tolerate any more)

5. She arrived at 7 o'clock *on the dot*. (Answer: *on time; exactly at the time stated*)

6. He *served time* in Holloway for assaulting a police officer. (Answer: *to be in prison as a punishment for a crime*)

7. Claudia hasn't been swimming *in donkey's years*. (Answer: *a very long time*)

Exercise 18 Underline the idiomatic expressions in the following sentences.¹⁹

1. You shouldn't let her walk all over you like that. You should stand up for yourself a bit. (Answer: You shouldn't let her walk all over you like that. You should stand up for yourself a bit.) (*let someone walk all over you* =allow someone to treat you badly)

2. She's so much cleverer than her brother. People could run rings around her in scientific arguments.

(Answer: She's so much cleverer than her brother. People could run rings around her in scientific arguments) (*run rings around* =be much more successful than/successfully manipulate)

Exercise 19 Use the verb *break* to express the following ideas.

1. to disobey a law or rule (Answer: *break a law/rule*)

2. to do something faster or better than it has ever been done before (Answer: *break a record*)

3. to make someone extremely sad (Answer: *break someone's heart*)

4. to win all the money as at a game of cards (Answer: *break the bank*)

5. to kill oneself by doing something dangerous or foolish (Answer: *break one's neck*)

6. to let out gases from the stomach and bowels (Answer: *break wind*)

7. to succeed in completing the largest or hardest part of a task or undertaking (Answer: *break*

the back of something)

8. to get people to be sociable together (Answer: *break the ice*)

9. to quarrel (argue) with someone in a friendly manner (Answer: *break a lance with someone*)

10. to drink wine with someone (Answer: *break a bottle with someone*)

Exercise 20 (brainstorming)

A brainstorming activity can be done to let students revise idioms containing a particular word. One example could be the words that go with the verb *raise*, as shown below.

raise Cain/the devil/the roof/hell =to become very angry: *Mother will raise hell if you wake the baby* • **raise the wind** =to obtain the money needed: *The church is trying to raise the wind for a new carpet* • **raise a hand to** =to hit someone: *Don't you dare raise a hand to my son!* • **raise the ante** =to increase one's demands or to try to get more things from a situation, even though this involves more risks: *Sanctions raised the ante considerably in the Middle East crisis* • **raise an objection to** =to express particular opposition to (something such as an idea): *I wish to raise an objection to the chairman's last remark* • **raise one's voice** =to speak louder, especially in an angry way: *Stop raising your voice, Edna* • **raise an eyebrow** =to cause a person to show surprise, e.g. by moving his eyebrows: *The stories of John's strange adventures in Nepal scarcely raised an eyebrow among his friends because they had heard them all before* • **raise one's glass to somebody** =drink his health: *Mr. Charlton, I think we should raise a glass/our glasses to our hostess* • **raise a stink** =to make trouble by complaining: *Activists have raised a stink about the shipments of nuclear waste* • **raise somebody's hackles** (also: *make someone's hackles rise* or *get somebody's hackles up*) =to say or do something that makes someone very angry: *The proposal to build 500 new homes has raised environmentalists' hackles.*

This activity will make learners aware of the different constructions that a particular word can form.

Exercise 21 Learners can be given several idiomatic word combinations that collocate with certain verbs, but include a combination that does not belong. Learners must identify which words do not collocate with the verbs, as in the following examples: *kick the bucket/the pail/the cup/teapot/the ghost It's raining cats and wolves/rats/dogs/mice/rabbits.*

Exercise 22 (Translation)

Students may be asked:

1. to find a suitable translation (i.e. a translation which fits the context) for idioms in sentences.
2. to translate into Arabic (orally/in writing) sentences containing idioms, and pay particular attention to the idiomatic expressions in the sentences. Students should be aware of the danger of translating such idiomatic expressions as *kick the bucket* word for word.
3. to replace the italicized words in sentences with idiomatic expressions and translate them (orally/in writing) into Arabic.

V. Summary And Conclusion

In this paper we have aimed to provide a backcloth for the study of English idioms. We have shown that idioms are those modes of expression peculiar to a language (or dialect) which frequently defy logical and grammatical rules. They are also more or less invariable in form or order in a way that makes them different from literal expressions. English is a

language particularly rich in idioms. Most, but not all, of English idiomatic expressions are phrases of two or more words. Many, but not all, of these expressions belong to informal spoken English rather than to formal written English: "In standard spoken and written English today idiom is an established, universal and essential element that, used with care, ornaments and enriches the language." (Collins, 1958: xi) Without idioms English would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing.

Because idioms are frozen patterns of language, they allow little or no variation in form. Students should, therefore, be enabled to understand idiomatic expressions and use them successfully and appropriately. I know from my experience how difficult idioms could be for Iraqi students learning English as a foreign language. Idiomatic expressions are, in a very broad sense, metaphorical rather than literal. We have seen that the meaning of idioms cannot be worked out from the meaning of its constituent words. Comparing and contrasting literal and figurative meanings of idioms will enable learners to recognize idiomatic usage and to interpret idioms accordingly. It also establishes a link between the form and the meaning. Comparing idioms in the first and second languages will enable students to discover which idioms are identical, which are similar, and which are different. Fries (1945) states that "the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner"(p.9). In that way, positive transfer can be utilized and interference avoided: "in the comparison between native and foreign language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning" (Lado, 1957:1).

Experience also shows that most students are very interested in learning and translating idiomatic language. Learning and translating idioms is, or should be, an integral part of vocabulary learning in a foreign language. Idioms can be added to the vocabulary being learned by including them in dialogues, reading comprehension passages, etc. Additionally, the study has shown that it is unrealistic to always expect to find equivalent idiomatic expressions in the target language as a matter of course. This is because the way a language chooses to express, or not express, various meanings cannot always be predicted and only occasionally matches the way another language chooses to express the same meanings. One language may express it by means of an idiom, another may express it by means of a transparent fixed expression, a third may express it by means of a single word or word group, and so on. Like single words, idiomatic expressions -similes, metaphors and sayings, jargon, slang and colloquialisms, and verbal phrasal (multi-word verbs) -may be culture specific, which can make them untranslatable or difficult to translate.

In short, complete or near-complete mastery of idiomatic expressions is *next door to setting the Thames on fire*; it is just *a pie in the sky*.

Endnotes

¹ All the idiomatic expressions in this paper are clearly explained, nearly all with one or more examples of how they are commonly used by speakers and writers of English and Arabic. Minor modifications to the example sentences taken from the sources at the researcher's elbow have been made.

² **not give/care/a hoot/two hoots (also: not give/care a damn/darn)** =not to care at all || **by the skin of one's teeth** =narrowly; only just **off balance** =unable to stay steady or upright.

³ In writing this paper, the Longman, Oxford, etc dictionaries (both general and special) have naturally been the researcher's sheet-anchor. Other sources consulted include books and articles (see References).

⁴ There is a marked tendency for a few colours -*black, blue, green, red* and *white*- to be used idiomatically:

black and blue =bruised **once in a blue moon** =very rarely or never (*like*) **a red rag to a bull** =likely to cause strong resentment, anger, violence, etc. **give somebody/get the green light** =give somebody/get permission to do something **paint the town red** =go out and enjoy a lively, boisterous time in bars, night-clubs, etc., usually in order to celebrate something **whiter than white** =never doing anything wrong **in black and white** =in written form, and therefore definite **draw a red herring across the trail** =introduce irrelevant matter to distract attention from the subject being discussed: *the prime minister's speech was a mere red herring* **once in a blue moon** =hardly at all or hardly ever: *we go out to eat once in a blue moon*.

⁵ It should be noticed that pronouns often cannot be substituted for nouns in idiomatic phrases without loss of the idiomatic meaning, hence the ill-formedness of **Someone spilled them* (=the beans) *about Rick's surprise party* **He almost bought it* (=the farm) **John kicked it* (=the bucket) *at 5 pm*. The reason that pronouns often cannot be substituted for nouns in idiomatic expressions is that the meaning of the idiom phrase *as a whole* has become idiomatic. Thus, the noun *beans* cannot be treated as a single word that can be replaced by an equivalent word or pronoun. As shown above, however, a noun may be replaced by a pronoun in a literal (=non-idiomatic) sentence (see Cooper, 1998).

⁶ Reference may also be made to the following publications in amplification of what has been said here about the grammatical patterns of idioms: Fragiadakis (1985); Gibbs, (1986); Irujo (1986b); Moon (1998); Reeves (1975), among others.

⁷ The adverbial particles most commonly used to form part of a phrasal verb include: *away, back, down, in, off, on, out, up*, e.g. *come back, lie down, use up*. Note that the meaning of phrasal verbs consisting of verbs of movement plus an adverb particle is often clear from their separate elements: *Don't throw away anything that might be useful*.

⁸ A desire for alliteration, rhyme, euphony, repetition, etc. may sometimes be a dominating factor in the formation or the popularity of an idiom, for example: **bag and baggage** =with all one's portable belongings: *They threw her out of the house bag and baggage* **at sixes and sevens** =in confusion or in disagreement: *I'm at sixes and sevens about what to do* **be hard hit** (also *be hit hard*) =to be badly affected by something that has happened; to suffer loss because of (some event): *He was hard hit when prices went up, because he had no hope of a wage rise* **rack and ruin** (*go to rack and ruin*) =to gradually get into a very bad condition as a result of not being taken care of: *The old farmhouse had gone to rack and ruin* **high and dry** (*leave somebody high and dry*) =to leave someone without any help or without the things that they need:

Michael quit, leaving Elliot high and dry to run the new company by hook or by crook =by any means possible: The police are going to get these guys, by hook or by crook **run rings round/around** =do something very much better than: *He can run rings round me at tennis* **Horses for courses**: people or things are employed for the purpose for which they are suited: *Jones can do the work; Smith can't. I'm afraid that Smith will just have to learn that in business it's horses for courses* **call a spade a spade** =name or describe somebody/something plainly and directly: *I hate long fancy words - I have always called a spade a spade.* (also: *call a spade a (bloody) shovel*).

⁹ Note that in **Jane has gone** (also: **come**) **down with a cold/with flu, down with means ill with**.

¹⁰ The sayings **Easy come, easy go, The more, the merrier, and Least said, soonest mended** are 'aphoristic sentences', which 'have one structural feature in common: the balancing of two equivalent constructions against each other' (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 205). Novel sentences can be created on the same lines: *The more of these, the merrier the linguist* (taken from Fodor, 1983:26).

¹¹ There is only one exception to the rule that, in English, the inversion of subject and operator is a must in all *wh*-questions: this is when the **Q**-element occurs as subject, e.g. *Who opened the mail/*Who did open the mail?* Compare: *Which books has Mary lent you? /*Which books Mary has lent you?* However, in **How goes it?**, where the **Q**-element *how* is not subject, it seems that the rule of initial **Q**-element takes precedence over the rule of subject-operator inversion: **How does it go?* (See Randolph and Greenbaum, 1973: 197.)

¹² Idioms carry and reflect culture. Cultural differences can be an obstacle in understanding the foreign language. Because of cultural diversity, exact equivalence is not always easy to achieve, especially when translating idiomatic expressions, as they are heavily culture-laden. Students may fail to make sense of an idiom. To illustrate, the English idiom *It's raining cats and dogs* does not make sense to Iraqi learners of English because this idiom does not exist in their culture. To communicate the same idea, Iraqi learners would prefer the non-idiomatic sentence *It is raining hard/heavily*, which makes sense in English:

المطر غزير، إن ها تمطر بغزارة، يهطل المطر بغزارة.

¹³ **A cat has nine lives** [saying] refers to the belief that a cat, because of its natural qualities of speed, cleverness, etc. is very difficult to kill and stays alive in situations that would have caused the death of most other animals; it is very difficult to kill a cat.

¹⁴ Originally, in olden times a criminal was driven in a cart to the place of execution (Collins, 1958:58)

¹⁵ **Go west young man** is "a phrase that is used when advising someone to go somewhere new to start a new and better life (originally in the American West)" (*Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, 1992:1490; Collins, 1958:79).

¹⁶ CB (=Citizen's Band) is a radio on which people can speak to each other over short distances. In the US, long-distance truck drivers often have CBs, which they use to speak to other drivers, both socially and to avoid the police.

¹⁷ **'die'** is the singular of **'dice'**. When a player has thrown the dice, he must accept whatever number is shown on them.

¹⁸ Passage taken with adaptation from Heaton (1995:57).

¹⁹ Students can be asked to underline idioms they find in a text. It is helpful to give them different kinds of idioms to look for, e.g. idiomatic verb phrases/sentences/noun phrases, idioms consisting of words joined by *and* or *or*, etc.

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- المعجم الوسيط ، لمجمع اللغة العربية بالقاهرة،
- المعلوف لأب لويس ، _____ ، بيروت

دراسة في مشاكل تعلم العبارات الإصطلاحية وترجمتها

أ.م.د. عبد المجيد حميد جودي

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية/ كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة بغداد

الخلاصة:

تعد العبارات الإصطلاحية ركنا مهما من أركان اللغة الإنجليزية, وتعرف العبارة الإصطلاحية على أنها عبارة ذات معنى لا يمكن أن يستمد من مجرد فهم معاني كلماتها منفصلة, إنها طريقة خاصة في التعبير مؤداها تأليف كلمات في عبارة تتميز بها لغة دون غيرها من اللغات. فالتعابير الإصطلاحية الإنجليزية *go far* و *pull your socks up* و *grey matter* تعني ينجح نجاحا عظيما و يبذل مجهودا أكبر و عقل/ تفكير, على التوالي- تعابير إصطلاحية لا يعتمد في معناها على المعاني المعجمية لمفردات كل عبارة, و ينبغي أن تعالج معالجة كلية لاجزئية. ولذلك فإنّ المعنى الإصطلاحي لقولنا في الإنجليزية

If you want to go far you should pull your socks up and use your grey matter

هو

إذا أردت أن تنجح فما عليك إلا أن تبذل مجهودا كبيرا وتستخدم عقلك.

ومثل هذه العبارات الإصطلاحية تجعل متعلم الإنجليزية الذي لم يعتد بعد هذه العبارات الثابتة التي لا تتجزأ ولا تتفتت يحارفي ترجمته. وقس على ما ذكرناه المصطلحات الأخرى مثل *hard up* (مُعسر, معوز, في عوز شديد) و *fly off the handle* (يغضب, ينفذ صبره) و *hot air* (هراء) و *spill the beans* (يفشي/ يذيع السر). يعني هذا البحث باستكشاف بعض الأسباب التي ينظر إليها على أنها تشكل عائقا أمام من يريد تعلم المصطلح الإنجليزي وترجمته الى العربية, ولانزعم أننا سنقدم هنا مراجعة شاملة لدراسات سابقة في موضوع المصطلح, نذكر منها على سبيل المثال آدمز وكودر *Adams and Kuder* ١٩٨٤ وكيرك باتريك *Kirkpatrick* ٢٠٠١ ولانج لوتز *Langlotz* ٢٠٠٦, وسنحاول أن نركز على مشكلات تعلم العبارات الإصطلاحية الإنجليزية وكيفية ترجمتها الى العربية.

يقع هذا البحث في أقسام خمسة. يشكل القسم الأول مقدمة البحث, ويتناول القسم الثاني بالتحليل الصعوبات التي يواجهها متعلم الإنجليزية العراقي في جانب المصطلح, في حين يتضمن القسم الثالث توصيات ومقترحات ذات مضامين تعليمية تخص المصطلح. اما القسم الرابع فيقدم بعض الأنشطة التي تساعد المتعلم العراقي على التدريب على استيعاب التراكيب الإصطلاحية واستعمالها في الكلام والكتابة. ويعرض القسم الخامس النتائج التي توصل اليها البحث.