

The Placement of Idioms in Traditional and Non-Traditional Approaches

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Abstract

Idioms present numerous obstacles to linguistic theory and natural language processing. This paper highlights key issues surrounding the notion of idioms and its definitions, placing them within the context of the broader category of formulaic sequences. The treatment of idioms in traditional and non-traditional approaches is essentially different. Mainstream linguistic theories tend to consider idioms as peripheral language chunks whose meaning cannot be analysed or decomposed. A major criticism of this approach is that it ignores language use and human experience which form the building blocks of the assumptions held in non-traditional approaches, particularly in cognitive approaches. This paper acknowledges and engages with the difficulties surrounding the work on idioms, comparing how they are treated in traditional vs. non-traditional approaches. This paper also goes some way towards arguing for placing them within a specific – yet plausible – coherent cognitive-inspired framework.

Key Words: Idioms, Formulaic sequences, Traditional approaches, Non-traditional approaches, Generative linguistics, Cognitive linguistics.

1. Introduction

The behaviour of idioms as ‘different’ and the irregularities they present compared to ‘regular’ strings in the language is the locus of most research into idioms. Idioms are one type of formulaic sequences at large¹. They can be considered *formulaic* in the sense that they have a fixed or a semi-fixed structure in terms of allowing modification. Wray and Perkins (2000) identifying the broader category of formulaic sequences proposed that they are a sequence of words which is, or appears to be, prefabricated. This paper aims to shed light on how idioms are defined and treated in traditional and non-traditional approaches. I argue that theoretical (particularly ‘mainstream’ traditional approaches) attempts to investigate the behaviour of idioms have a number of shortcomings. However, I do not intend to provide an exhaustive list of all the theoretical approaches of idioms in order to put forward anything like a definitive descriptive account of the phenomenon, devise a definition, or propose a comprehensive model of idioms. Rather, the objective of the paper is twofold: Firstly, to avoid the terminological confusion encountered due to different labelling and definitions. Secondly, it is to formulate an argument for the plausibility of cognitive approaches to linguistics for the analysis and study of idioms.

2. The notion ‘idiom’

Fixed expressions and idioms (FEIs; Moon, 1998), *multi-word units* (MWUs; Grant and Bauer, 2004), *multi-word expressions*, *fixed expressions* (Carter, 1998), *formulaic sequences* (Cieślicka, 2010; Schmitt, 2004; Wray, 2008), *presumes* (Mel’cuk, 1995) and *phraseologisms* (Gries, 2008) are some of the various terms used to describe a very similar linguistic phenomenon relating to multi-word expressions. Gläser (1984) uses the term *phraseological unit*, in accordance with the eastern European linguistic tradition, and McCarthy (1998) prefers the traditional and prototypical term *idiom*. A variety of terminology is used to describe this category which subsumes various sub-types of expressions, such as *collocations* and *phrasal verbs*.

1 I will adopt the most traditional and frequently used term *idiom* throughout this paper to refer to many types of multi-word expressions of various degrees of semantic and syntactic opaqueness. I however, use the term *formulaic sequences*, to refer to the broader category as a whole including idioms together with phrasal verbs and collocations.

These sub-types are also labelled differently (e.g. *idioms* versus *idiomatic expressions*). However, *idiom* seems to be a classical term that is used to cover a large proportion of this category by researchers from different research avenues (e.g. Fernando, 1996; McCarthy, 1998; Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994). Firth (1957) is assumed to be one of the first scholars to study formulaic sequences. He, nonetheless, subsumed idioms as a subcategory of collocations, and clearly stated that the converse is not true. Other scholars (e.g. Makkai, 1972; Fernando, 1996) have used the term *idiom* to account for phrasal verbs though other scholars do not (e.g. Moon², 1998; Grant and Bauer, 2004). What qualifies as an idiom in one approach may not do so in another. Wray (2008) in describing processing formulaic sequences emphasized that they are different from other strings in the language, stating that: "...they are customarily described as bypassing the normal process by which language is construed" (p.63).

Despite the lack of consensus amongst scholars with regard to what should be termed an *idiom*, there does seem to be consensus over setting certain syntactic or semantic-based limitations on to what qualifies as an idiom (e.g. Fernando, 1996; Tabossi and Zardon, 1993; Moon, 1998). These limitations for example can be constrained by an orthographic criterion – an idiom should be composed of at least two or more separate words as put forward by Moon (1998). There are also other criteria which pertain to rules of grammar (e.g. allowing syntactic transformation to the passive form) and semantic opaqueness. Along the same lines, Nurnberg et al. (1994) proposed the level of conventionality, inflexibility, figuration, provability, informality, and effect of the idiom in context as parameters to define idioms. It is quite obvious that there are variations creating fuzziness in labelling the category of formulaic sequences, let alone in providing a full descriptive account of them, which constitute a major challenge to researchers. Therefore, idioms and their characterizing features cannot be accounted for equally, because they constitute a ‘fuzzy category’ that resists single-criterion definitions (Nurnberg et al., 1994). Researchers tend to use different terminology depending on their research focus and the theoretical approach they subscribe to, as well as their motivation for the research.

3. Traditional approaches to idioms

Structural and generative approaches will be considered as ‘traditional approaches’. According to Graddol (1993), *mainstream* or traditional linguistics can be regarded as a manifestation of structuralism. In this approach (which arguably inspired the generative model), language is viewed as an autonomous mechanism (Graddol, 1993). This view is the common denominator between these mainstream or traditional approaches. Traditional accounts of idioms focus on two problematic areas which are mostly concerned with the generativist work of idiomaticity: how to represent idioms in the speaker's lexicon, and how to account for their syntactic behaviour.

3.1. The structural approach

Structural linguistics views language as a systematic structure comprising ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’, i.e. pairs of ‘thought’ and ‘sound’ in the mind of the speaker, as in Saussure's approach. Along with other cognitive linguists, Evans and Green (2006, p. 476) propose that both signified and signifiers are “psychological entities”. They also mention that although there are differences between Saussure's approach and the cognitive linguistics approach, the cognitive approach nonetheless adopts the idea of the Saussurean ‘symbol’. One of the broadest definitions of idioms from within this approach was put forward by Hackett (1958). He espoused a structuralist-inspired model whereby any stretch of language whose meaning cannot be deduced from the constituent parts is an idiom. His definition regards bound morphemes such as the prefix *pre-* as the smallest unit of idioms. He claims that *pre-* is an idiom because we cannot figure out its meaning from its structure. His definition fails to distinguish single lexical items from grammatical structures that include multiple lexical items. For an empirical study on idioms, making such a distinction is nonetheless useful, which probably helps explain why Hackett's definition has not been widely adopted.

In a structural model, language operates based on structural arrangements determined by abstract rules (Holliday, 2006) which do not capture ‘idiosyncratic’ grammatical, lexical, or phraseological phenomena (i.e. formulaic sequences). Chomsky (1972) was one of the first linguists to criticize structural linguistic approaches for their failure to explain the complex and ambiguous sentence structures of which formulaic sequences constitute a great part. His particular criticism was that structural linguists do not adequately provide an efficient approach to account for language at the phonological and morphological levels.

² Moon (1998) states That they are easily separable on lexico-grammatical grounds, even though they represent similar levels of idiomaticity to the FEIs category. On the same grounds, she intentionally avoids proverbs, stating that she needs to set limits.

Both of these, he claims, have a finite number of units. However, he postulated that structural linguistics failed to provide sufficient arguments to account for syntactic relations (in which the category of idioms falls), as an infinite number of sentences can be generated, thus making it impossible to account for all possible generated sentences. He proposed a set of *rules* that *govern* generating an infinite number of sentences in the language. Chomsky's dissatisfaction with the assumptions held by structural linguistics to explain syntactical complexity was the impetus that led him to establish the foundations of generative grammar.

3.2. The generative approach

Although the majority of early generative work in grammar focused on syntactic relations, the theory was later applied to phonological and semantic components. Chomsky's dissatisfaction with the structuralist approach was over accounting for the syntactic relations where idioms fall. Idioms have been a point of controversy in generative approaches in Standard Theory of transformational grammar (Fraser, 1970; Katz and Postal 1963), and Generative Semantics (Newmeyer, 1972). It is fair to say, then, that they pose a challenge to generative theories of syntax too. Because of space constraints, I will consider only the transformational grammar approaches in relation to idioms.

Accounting for idioms was a major topic addressed by linguists working from a generative-inspired approach. Katz and Postal (1963) presented a narrower definition than Hockett (1958). Their definition integrates idioms into a transformational generative grammar model. Their approach assumes that the whole meaning of an idiomatic expression or sentence that contains an idiomatic expression is different from the meaning of the idiom's constituent parts. In their view, then, polymorphemic words whose compositional meanings are different from the meanings of their constituent parts form an idiom. A word such as *classroom*, for instance, is regarded as an idiom because it refers to a 'study room' in a school, which is different from the words *class* and *room*, which each have multiple meanings. However, they differentiate *classroom* from words such as *untrue*, whose meaning is the same as the meaning of *un-* + *true*. Katz and Postal's definition of idioms also considers phrases whose meaning cannot be retrieved from the individual words, as in *kick the bucket*. Put simply, any linguistic structure whose meaning cannot be retrieved from its constituent elements qualifies as an idiom in such approach.

Katz and Postal (1963) distinguished 'lexical idioms' composed of polymorphemic words from 'phrase idioms', whose structure falls into higher syntactic categories (phrases, clauses and sentences). Lexical idioms belong to the lowest syntactic categories (noun, verb, adjective). They also point out that lexical idioms are stored in a person's lexicon and state that, unlike lexical idioms, phrase idioms are stored in an 'idioms list', because an idiom has two possible meanings: literal or idiomatic. The literal meaning of *kick the bucket*, for instance, is 'to strike the bucket with a foot', while the idiomatic meaning is 'to die'. Their criteria for phrase idioms are primarily concerned with *productivity* and *transformability* of the expression. From their point of view, if an idiom allows transformation to the passive without losing its figurative meaning – which e.g. *kick the bucket* does not – then it does not qualify as a phrase idiom, because it is not productive.

Makkai's (1972) investigation into idioms is one of the more influential ones, albeit from a formal perspective. Makkai (1972) situated idioms within a structural model that views polymorphemic words as idioms, similar to Katz and Postal (1963). The only difference between the definition of Makkai and Katz and Postal is that the latter includes words consisting of one bound and one free morpheme in their definition of idioms, whereas Makkai (1972) only views polymorphemic words consisting of at least two free morphemes (e.g. *blackmail*) as idioms.

Weinreich (1969) formulated a more applicable and even narrower definition. Only expressions such as *pull someone's leg* are considered idioms, according to his definition, whereas single words such as *telephone* are not, thus overcoming the inapplicability of Hockett (1958) and Katz and Postal (1963). He agrees with Katz and Postal that only expressions whose meaning cannot be retrieved from their constituent parts are idioms. However, he limits the scope of idioms by using the term to refer only to expressions that have both a literal and an idiomatic or figurative interpretation, as he believes that only expressions causing 'ambiguity' as in *pull someone's leg* qualify as idioms.

Weinreich (1969) also makes a strict distinction between idioms and 'stable collocations', such as *part and parcel*, which are merely a co-occurrence of words because there is nothing *idiomatic* about them. He views idiomaticity as causing ambiguity.

In his view, the co-occurrence of two words does not qualify an expression to be idiomatic, as it does not involve a *figurative* or *metaphorical* usage – a characteristic of idiomaticity – which is at odds with Firth's (1957) notion of idioms and collocations. Firth treats idioms as irregular units from a semantic perspective, but his focus is on their transformational deficiencies and ambiguity, which are important, but are not the exclusive defining features. Fraser (1970) does not share Weinreich's view. He sees any 'constituent' or a series of constituents whose semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives as an idiom. In his model, idioms fall into a hierarchical system that chiefly focuses on the transformation permissibility of the expression. Thus, his model is concerned with the semantic properties of idioms, such as 'frozenness' and 'analysability'. He placed idioms in a spectrum of various levels which are based on the transformation potential of the idioms, rather than the lack of transformation or productivity, as in Weinreich's view.

3.2.1. Shortcomings of the traditional approaches to idioms

The previous models have focused on central characteristics of idioms, i.e. their compositional aspects. In the case of Hockett, this resulted in treating even some individual morphemes as idioms. Considering morphemes as idioms might be highly influential in theory, but it might be complicated for empirical purposes. Moreover, the definition does not commit to any specific limits regarding the number of lexical elements involved, whereas any up-to-date dictionary will only consider combinations of at least two words as idioms. Katz and Postal's (1963) argument about the productivity of idioms is also important, in that they account for 'abnormality' compared to other units in the language. Their argument reflects a robust belief in lack of complete compositionality as an essential tenet of idiomaticity which in Weinreich's view was linked to ambiguity.

Added to the previous pitfalls in accounting for idioms which marked generative approaches to syntax, some of their properties (particularly compositionality, productivity and syntactic variance) have not been satisfactorily described by any of the generative frameworks. These properties have traditionally led generative grammarians to describe idioms as extra-grammatical, with no mechanism to fit them properly within the theories of linguistic knowledge and representation. Generally, for a theory to accommodate the behaviour of idioms, they must be treated as an integral part of the language, despite their irregular behaviour, particularly at the syntactic level.

Treating idioms as 'extra-grammatical' is another major concern over the treatment of idioms, and it is apparent in Chomsky's formal theory of grammar (cf. The Minimalist Program), which has been criticized – from a functionalist perspective – for narrowly restricting the knowledge of language to grammatical form, especially syntax (Widdowson, 2003). However, knowledge of a language does not only involve knowing its forms, but also its functions. Moreover, any account of grammatical knowledge cannot ignore the fact that linguistic form is often functionally motivated. Abstraction from function misinterprets the nature of language, as it results in a change or loss of meaning. This is especially true of certain idioms which resist alteration, e.g. *kick the bucket*; if this idiom is abstracted and passivized, this change, albeit grammatical, will result in complete loss of the idiomatic meaning 'die' in a literal interpretation of the sentence. Knowledge of form, function, and conventions of use represents the essence of mastering idiomatic expressions. Widdowson (2003) posits that linguistics is the study of how languages are *functionally* informed. On this view, it is semantics which is primary. Knowledge of language is not restricted to knowledge of rules but also knowledge of use and conventions, which also applies to idioms.

Along the same lines of grammaticality, another issue arise as it may be violated in some idioms. Chomsky famously differentiates competence from performance (cf. Chomsky, 1965). *Performance* is what people actually say, which can be grammatical or ungrammatical, whereas *competence* is the level of knowledge about language, prominently including syntax. Thus Chomsky's explanation of the 'grammatical' aspect of language ignores what people actually say (Tomasello, 2003). This implies that he reduces language to its grammar, where meaning is secondary. A meaningless sentence, – if grammatical – can be considered as part of the language, as long as it follows grammatical rules, i.e. can undergo grammatical transformations. A sentence such as *she no like bananas*, in contrast, is of no interest as it is ungrammatical. Nonetheless, such examples are frequently encountered.

In fact the concept of grammaticality itself is questionable as it revolves around judgments. Chomskyan approaches rely on native people's intuition as to whether a construct is grammatical or not, a notion seen as fallible by Wray (2002). Concerning reliance on intuitions, she suggests that it is not at all clear whether all people will make the same judgements, or that their judgements are actually a true reflection of how language is used. Moreover, the Chomskyan approach also tends to disregard the social situation in which language is normally produced (i.e. the pragmatic context).

Criticising generative approaches, Gries (2008) argues that phraseology has figured prominently in both cognitive linguistics and corpus linguistics, but has had little influence on generative linguistics for two reasons. First, generative linguistics focuses mostly on syntax, which crucially involves the application of a set of grammatical rules, irrespective of meaning, as distinct from the ‘lexicon’ that enlists all the non-compositional/idiomatic items. Second, a generative model of idioms or ‘phraseologisms’, to use Gries’s terminology, makes it difficult to draw a strict dividing line between what *is* and *is not* idiomatic. Several researchers have, nonetheless, shown that they vary considerably in terms of their syntactic flexibility (e.g. the seminal work of Nunberg et al., 1994).

Considering what have been said before, that does not entail that the generative approaches failed to account for idioms, they overlap with and benefit from other approaches too. The work of generative approaches should therefore never be underestimated. A number of studies within this approach have been conducted and have provided fruitful results to inform other theories (cf. Fillmore, Kay and O’Connor, 1988; Makkai, 1972). The assumptions held in generative approaches have also motivated other approaches to put forward constructive counter arguments from within other non-traditional approaches to idioms.

4. Non-traditional approaches to idioms

In this paper, I will consider phraseology and cognitive linguistic approaches as non-traditional as opposed to the generative and the structural approaches. Non-traditional approaches prominently include cognitive linguistics which chronologically developed later. The cognitive linguistic approach which is most prominent— in a nutshell, views language as a cognitive process that is not autonomous. Further, in contrast to the generative approach, it does not assume that the different ‘levels’ of language, e.g. phonology, semantics and syntax, are represented as separate components. Phraseology is the study of multiword expressions, and other types of multi-word units which are often referred to as *phrasemes* (cf. e.g. Mel’čuk, 1995). This approach was initially viewed as being highly descriptive. However, it has now developed in theoretical and applied research with a strong focus on formulaic language.

3.1 The phrase logical approach

Various influential accounts into idioms have been proposed from phrase logical perspectives (e.g. Cowie, 2001; Granger and Meunier 2008; Gries, 2008; Moon, 1998, Sinclair, 1991). Many scholars now agree that a lexicon is not just a repository of single words but rather a dynamic system, which includes ‘larger lexical items’ (e.g. Bybee, 2010; Croft and Cruse, 2004; Langacker, 1987). Phraseology is the field of research that is largely concerned with these larger lexical items (i.e. formulaic sequences at large), and the context in which a phrase is used, as well as its various usages. It is closely and directly related to lexicography and builds on corpus linguistics. Gries (2008) observes that the interest in phraseology has grown considerably over the last twenty years or so. In the past, phraseology was caricatured as “idiom researchers and lexicographers classifying and researching various kinds of fairly frozen idiomatic expressions”. In contrast, now it is concerned with theoretical research and practical applications which have much more profound influence on researchers in the sub-disciplines of linguistics, as well as in language learning, acquisition, teaching and natural language processing (Gries, 2008, p.3).

Sinclair’s (1991) work represents an influential neo-Firthian account, which according to Malmkjær (2004), places emphasis on the syntagmatic relations of lexis and runs in parallel with traditional approaches to idioms. According to McEnery and Hardie (2012), a common trend in the neo-Firthian approach is to view a word, its phraseology and collocational features as the keystones of linguistic description. After an examination of the way texts are organized, Sinclair (1991) offered an explication of how idioms operate in a given language. He proposed two principles that govern a speaker’s choices in sentence construction: (1) the open choice and (2) the idiom principle. The open choice principle refers to the many options a speaker has to produce sentences in accordance with conventional grammatical restrictions. For Sinclair, the open-choice principle reflects the normal way of describing language, as it covers word-for-word operations. Formulaic language can be seen as a true embodiment of Sinclair’s idiom principle and this view constitutes the core of linguistic structure. It entails word choices not being random, and a speaker having at his/her disposal a large number of ‘preconstructed’ phrases, such as *of course*, which itself constitutes a single choice, even though it can be analysed as segments. These two principles are complementary and work together in language production (cf. Wray, 2002). Put simply, the speaker’s choice is not random; language users have freedom to choose, but are constrained by the topic, context and register of the situation in language production, and therefore need to resort to prefabricated items, including idioms.

Within this approach, Moon (1998) has also presented an influential model to explore what she called Fixed Expressions and Idioms (FEIs). Her corpus findings report that almost 40% of English FEIs allow lexical variation or transformation, and a smaller percentage has two or more variations. She differentiates *fixed expressions*, a term that is similar to Weinreich's *stable collocations*, from *idioms*. She believes the word 'fixed' is not applicable to idioms, which she defines in terms of characteristics such as compositionality and institutionalization where idioms can be placed along a scale of gradient features. Scholarships from within the phraseological approaches share similar assumptions held in the cognitive approaches— as will be presented in the next section, but they are concerned in particular with multi-word units at large. Gries (2008) argues that cognitive grammar, as outlined in Langacker's work (1987) and Goldberg's (1995) construction grammar are similar in their assumptions about phraseologisms, although terminology differs. The difference he notes pertains to non-compositionality, which he mentions when defining the parameters of phraseologisms.

4.1. The cognitive approaches

Cognitive linguists reject the idea that the mind has any unique and autonomous language-acquisition device. This position is at odds with the generative grammar approach (e.g. Chomsky, 1980). Although cognitive linguists do not necessarily disagree that part of human linguistic ability is innate and autonomous, they deny that it is *separate* or *different* from non-linguistic processes (e.g. retrieval of an event from memory). Cognitive linguistics also postulates that knowledge of language emerges from language use, which supports calls to account for language use in the real world, as language does not exist in a vacuum. In usage-based approaches, the emphasis is on the (dynamic) organization of linguistic knowledge, which consists of structured networks of 'constructions' as defined by construction grammarians (e.g. Fillmore et al., 1988) or the 'schemas' (mental representations) used by cognitive grammarians (e.g. Langacker, 1987).

Tomasello (2003) adopting a usage-based cognitive linguistic perspective, regards language use as a crucial aspect of the enculturation process and criticizes generative approaches. Tomasello questioned the idea of the 'innate grammar' held in generative grammar. He is particularly critical of the concept of 'grammatical sentences' being the prime focus of Chomsky, at the expense of supposedly 'non-grammatical' sentences which may actually be naturally encountered in everyday life such as idioms. He therefore proposes an alternative usage-based cognitive theory, with accounting for language use and social-pragmatic aspects also being central to his model.

In construction grammar, the construction represents the basic unit of grammar which is composed of symbolic configurations, defined as pairings of form and meaning/function (e.g. Fillmore et al., 1988; Fillmore, 1988; Goldberg, 1995, 2006; Lakoff, 1987). Thus, a construction has to be meaningful. Construction grammarians hold that the term includes phrases, idioms, single words and morphemes. The basic argument held in construction grammar is that words and complex constructions (e.g. idiomatic expressions) are necessarily pairs of form and meaning, regardless of their formal or internal semantic complexity.

Therefore, the merit of construction grammar as a holistic and (often) usage-based framework lies in its commitment to treating all types of expressions equally. In the componential model adopted by the generative approach (e.g. Chomsky, 1980), a single word is considered the largest unit of linguistic components, which are governed by highly general rules of grammar. Lexicon and syntax are viewed as separate, which means that some exceptions are not accounted for (e.g. idioms). Construction grammarians, however, make no distinction between grammar and lexicon, and instead propose a syntax-lexicon continuum.

Langacker's theory of cognitive grammar is also constructionist in nature (cf. Langacker, 2005). Cognitive grammar's most fundamental assumption is that grammar is symbolic in nature; in Langacker's own words, "grammar is conceptualization" (Langacker, 1987, p. 494). In his view, lexicon, morphology and syntax are not essentially different or separate. Langacker (1991) espouses a lexicon-syntax continuum view, claiming that grammar resides in patterns to combine simpler symbolic structures into more complex ones. In other words, any symbolically complex expression can, in his view, be subsumed in the language, as long as it is symbolic, i.e. meaningful. Langacker (2008) emphasizing the centrality of meaning in cognitive linguistics mentioned: If generative linguistics views syntax as being central to language, Cognitive Linguistics accords this honor to meaning. The latter seems far more natural from the perspective of language users. When ordinary people speak and listen, it is not for the sheer pleasure of manipulating syntactic form— their concern is with the meaning expressed. This does not of course imply that grammar is unimportant in language or in language teaching. It is, however helpful to realize that grammar sub serves meaning rather than being an end itself. (p.67)

The assumptions held in cognitive grammar and cognitive linguistics are compatible with the constructionist approach to idioms of Fillmore et al. (1988). Their notion of construction is essentially at odds with the basic tenets of the generative model. The absence of the notion of constructions or any similar assumption in the generative approach makes it impossible for this model to account for a category in the language that cannot be simply captured by the ‘core grammar’, the ‘solution’ typically being for these patterns to be relegated to the so-called ‘periphery’ (Chomsky, 1980).

Fillmore et al. in referring to the placement of idiomatic expressions whose meaning and use cannot be deduced simply from knowledge of the constituent parts stated:

When constructions are interpreted as the products of maximally general rules, no place remains in the grammar for spelling out the non-predictable semantics and pragmatics that is frequently conventionally associated with particular constructions such as those we will describe [i.e. the *the X-er, the Y-er* construction or the *let alone* construction]. (Fillmore et al., 1988, p. 507)

5. *Plausibility of cognitive linguistic approaches for the study of idioms*

Cognitive linguistics is the common denominator of recent models in linguistics sharing cognitive-based theoretical assumptions including cognitive grammar (e.g. Langacker 1987, 1991) and construction grammar (e.g. Fillmore et al. 1988), as can be seen in their basic theoretical assumptions (cf. e.g. Croft, 2001 and Evans and Green, 2006, for elaborate discussions on the differences between these approaches). Cognitive linguistics is also compatible with the claims made in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Understanding metaphor is seen as one type of various construal operations (Croft and Cruse, 2004). They explain that construal operations are manifestations of four cognitive abilities in different realms of experience (i.e. attention, judgement, situations and constitution). Metaphor is a manifestation of the judgement/comparison processes.

Lakoff (1987) mentions that idiomatic expressions are both, ‘conceptually motivated’ and ‘bodily motivated’. In traditional linguistics and philosophy, metaphor and metonymy were mainly regarded as rhetorical or ornamental devices. Cognitive linguists have found evidence that they are not mere figures of speech but rather universal aspects and processes of cognition, hence the terms conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy. This insight forms the basis of the CMT of Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Similarly, Kövecses (2002) proposed that most idioms are ‘conceptually motivated’ and not just linguistic in nature. There is also linguistic evidence confirming the widespread use of both metaphor and metonymy particularly in formulaic language (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Barcelona, 2003).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) view metaphor as a way of perceiving one idea, or conceptual domain *target*, in terms of another (usually more concrete) idea or conceptual domain *source*. The *underlying conceptual domain* can be any coherent organization of human experience which may differ from one culture to another, and narrowly from one person to another. It is argued that human beings’ experience of conceptual domains is similar to a large extent. What actually differs is how they reflect this experience in a linguistic expression. Their experience of the world is central to the ‘embodiment of experience’, which is essential to cognitive linguistics, and also underlies the premises of CMT (N. Ellis, 2001). Cognitive linguists from various disciplines (e.g. Barlow and Kemmer, 2000; Goldberg, 1995; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Langacker, 1987) have provided insightful qualitative analyses of how language is grounded in our experience of the world. Research on conceptual metaphors (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Gibbs, Nayak, and Cutting, 1989; Kövecses and Szabó, 1996) refutes the notion that idioms are ‘dead’ metaphors with arbitrary meanings. Consequently, many idioms previously considered to be semantically opaque or arbitrary are now seen as either decomposable and/or conceptually motivated.

Moreover, cognitive linguistic approaches, particularly usage-based models, have also had a great impact on corpus-oriented studies on formulaic sequences such as Wulff’s (2010) model of idiomaticity and collostructional analysis³ (see, e.g., Stefanowitsch and Gries, 2003). Cognitive linguistics is compatible with usage-based models – an approach taken by many cognitive linguists as well.

3 The term *collostruction* is a blend of *collocation* and *construction*. Like a collocation, a collostruction is a co-occurrence between two items. It is, however, not between words. A collostruction is a co-occurrence between a *construction* and a word that occurs with it frequently.

The merit of cognitive and usage-based models can be seen on accounting for language use and experience as prime factors affecting our perception of idioms. Grammaticality is a theoretical notion but acceptability is observational. Cognitive approaches primarily focus on what is ‘used and acceptable’ not only ‘grammatical’, which implies the empirical reality of idioms.

The merit of cognitive approaches also amount to taking frequency of recurrence into perspective too. This embodies how frequency figures prominently in, and interacts with, language use and human experience in these approaches. Bybee (2010) argues for a position in cognitive linguistics whereby cognitive representations are strongly related to aspects of experience. Bybee (2010), referring to idioms, considers conventionalized multi-word expressions, prefabricated expressions, idioms and constructions to be ‘chunks’ when processing and analysing the language in use. If two or more smaller chunks with a certain degree of frequency occur together, a larger chunk (made up of the smaller chunks) is formed. Moreover, linguistic competence is also not seen as separate from performance, but as a system that is shaped and largely affected by linguistic usage.

In terms of applications, the processing and comprehension of idioms in L1 has been addressed in a surge of scholarly articles. L2 idiom comprehension in particular is overlooked in comparison to L1 studies as pointed out by Zyzik (2011). Cognitive-inspired approaches (e.g. Cieślicka, 2010, 2015) have made insightful findings in relation to how similar/different are idioms processed and treated in L2.

Another example is the application of CMT-inspired approach to the acquisition of metaphors and idioms by L2 learners. There is an increasing body of work that provides a backdrop and inspiration for this paper (e.g. Boers and Lindstromberg, 2006). Boers (2003, p. 231) indicates that “applying the notion of conceptual metaphor offers motivation and coherence to whole clusters of figurative idioms which – at first sight – appear to be arbitrary and unrelated”. By now, the effectiveness of cognitive linguistic approaches in pedagogically-oriented studies is empirically evidenced (e.g. Tyler, 2012). These studies have, so far, been informing language theories and teaching practices and instruction on the plausibility of cognitive-inspired learning and instruction.

6. Conclusion

As has clearly been shown, linguistic approaches have gone beyond the idea of the number/type of items that should qualify an expression to be considered an idiom. Scholars set criteria and identify parameters, mostly semantic or syntactic when defining idioms. This of course is highly dependent on the purpose of their analysis or niches which means that there is no one single definition for idioms. Theoretically, Idioms have been treated differently in the traditional and non-traditional approaches. Those approaches may seem opposing or different, which is partly true. They however benefit and build on each other and are essentially complementary. Most of the criticism of the traditional, namely the generative approaches to idioms were related to viewing idioms as a separate entity in the lexicon, and relegating them to a secondary position in the language. Another criticism is that it ignores experience and language use, and rather focuses on rule-governed constructs (which excludes some idioms).

Non-traditional approaches, particularly the cognitive linguistics approaches hold that lexicon and grammar are not separate and propose a lexicon syntax continuum –, which is one of the principal contrasts to the generative approaches. They also hold that language is a matter of use and conventions irrespective of grammaticality. This view has resulted in a radical change in the cognitive-inspired assumptions as represented in a myriad of recent theoretical and evidence-based studies. Particularly applications on metaphor to which part of idioms were explained in terms of the idea of embodiment. Moreover, some cognitive-based approaches argued that idioms are at least partly motivated and associated metaphor to human cognition and experience. Therefore, such potentials can offer an alternative framework to formal traditional theories of grammar and semantics to account for idioms at the theoretical level and also empirically in studying the processing and comprehension of idioms in L1 and L2, as well as idiom teaching and learning. The emphasis in the cognitive linguistic approach is on the meaning of the construction regardless of complexity or grammaticality. This assumption is still not free from criticism. Theoretically speaking, cognitive approaches may have overcome the hurdle of accounting for extra-grammatical units; however, they still do not fully describe how idioms are different from other strings in the language. Despite possible shortcomings, I propose a cognitive-linguistic construction grammar perspective as it offers a convincing theory of accounting for idioms thus far. Formulaic sequences including idioms can be best treated as *constructions* regardless of their complexity. They can be placed on a continuum accounting for (e.g. lexical, semantic, and syntactic properties) to account for their seemingly idiosyncratic behaviour.

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