

Insights into the semantic structure of idioms

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The idea that the meaning of idioms does not derive from the meaning of the words in them, that it is „opaque“, that their grammatical potential is limited, their meaning is a generalised sense and that idioms function like indivisible, yet decomposable units recurs in analogous statements of many authors (Doroszewski (1970); Arnold (1981); Anderson & Pelteret (2012, 106-109); Ayto (2020)). These features of idioms are not difficult to illustrate, while an explanation of the structure of the meaning of idioms can be further sought in cognitive linguistics. The question of how the dominant notion in the meaning of idioms is derived and becomes bound is less studied. The material is drawn from current English usage and English fiction.

The present paper looks deeper into the semantic composition of idioms to find out how their meaning becomes bound. This may reveal the semantic and grammatical properties of the words (proper nouns vs common nouns, a whole story vs its concrete features, etc.) and how they structure the meaning of idioms. The function of proper and common nouns makes the focus of this paper.

The meaning of the idiom, *Pandora's box*, indicates the function of the proper noun. Different sources emphasise either the problems in the meaning of this idiom and/or the causes, but the proper name functions as a reference rather than a general feature of something; it centres the meaning but is not semantically bound.

The meaning of the common nouns, *inch* and *mile*, in selected idioms (*give someone an inch*, *within an inch of your life*, *every inch sb*, etc.) is different. The noun, *inch*, is integrated in their structure to mean a small amount, a precipitous moment, perfection, etc. *Inch* does not feature as a literal unit of measurement. It functions in its generalised sense and is semantically bound.

The common noun, *mile*, in such idioms as: *to be miles apart*, *to go the extra mile*, *in for an inch*, *in for a mile*, is indicative. The meaning of the noun *mile* conveys the idea of something big or important, a complicated or difficult task, a great physical or metaphorical distance. It functions in its general sense, is semantically bound and allows no replacement in the meaning of these idioms.

Proper nouns are not semantically bound in the structure of idioms; they centre the meaning as overt reference units rather than generalised ideas. Common nouns are general in meaning, semantically bound and conceal the meaning of idioms. Their binding function is obscure. Given the difference in semantic structure, the former are easier and the latter are more difficult to memorise.

References

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