A. UNDERSTANDING IDIOMS

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IDIOMS ARE SEMI-FIXED EXPRESSIONS that are typically used in a figurative sense. For example, in the sentence ‘Exams are part of a carrot and stick method’, there are obviously no real carrots and sticks involved. The image is that of a donkey being encouraged to move forward by dangling a carrot in front of it or by hitting it with a stick. We can use this idiom to describe any event that involves more abstract rewards (the carrot) and threats (the stick).

All languages are full of idioms, and native speakers use them spontaneously without even thinking about their figurative nature. Language learners generally find idioms hard to understand, and this is not surprising. For example, learners are often not sure what image the idiom is based on. If a native speaker proposes to show you the ropes and you are not familiar with this expression, you might not immediately understand that she is proposing to teach you how to do a certain job. It would help if you knew that the expression was originally used in the context of sailing, where an experienced sailor had to show a novice how to handle the ropes on a boat.

Are idioms arbitrary?

Linguists used to believe that idioms were completely arbitrary: that is, you could not guess their meaning from the words they consist of. Consequently, teachers used to tell their students that the only way to master idioms was to learn them by heart. Fortunately, we now know that many idioms can be explained after all, and so they can be learned in systematic ways. Research tells us that when idioms are presented as non-arbitrary features of language, students find them much easier to understand and remember. In the following sections we will demonstrate the non-arbitrary nature of idioms.

Why idioms mean what they mean

Many idioms are derived from our general physical experiences (see Metaphor). For example, the expressions hot under the collar, breathe fire, and let off steam all refer to being angry, and they do this through the image of anger as something hot inside us. This makes sense to us, because when people get angry they often get red in the face as a result of rising body temperature. Similarly, the figurative expressions lend someone a hand, try your hand at something, and have your hands tied all use the image of the hand to refer to performing an action. This also makes sense, because we know from everyday experience that most activities involve the use of our hands.

Other idioms are derived from more specific areas of experience (or domains), such as sport, war, or cooking. Some of these domains may no longer be common in present-day life, but if we learn the original context in which the idiom was used and if we understand the image it is based on, we will find it is easier to understand. A helpful way of remembering idioms is to group them according to the domain that they are derived from, as follows:

Idioms derived from sailing:
clear the decks to first finish a job completely
a leading light a good example to follow
be on an even keel to make calm, steady progress

Idioms derived from war:
stick to your guns to refuse to change your opinion
fight a losing battle to be unlikely to succeed
be in the front line to have an important role

Idioms derived from entertainment (the theatre, the circus etc):
behind the scenes in secret
waiting in the wings ready to act when needed
a balancing act a difficult compromise

Which of the three domains shown above would you associate the following idioms with?

- take something on board
- close ranks
- steer clear of someone
- be centre stage
- a last-ditch effort
- the curtain comes down

If you recognize the origin of an idiom, you will often be able to work out its meaning on your own. For instance, the idiom put something on the back burner originates from the domain of cooking, and take a back seat comes from the domain of driving. Once you recognize these connections, it will be easier to understand sentences like these:

- We put the project on the back burner.
- The students were working well together, so I decided to take a back seat.

Idioms and culture

In general, idioms that are derived from our physical experiences, such as those that associate anger with heat, show strong similarities across different cultures, and they tend to be fairly easy to understand. This is not surprising, because basic physical experiences (like being hot or cold, sick or well) are shared universally. This does not mean that these idioms can simply be translated word for word from one language to another: their precise form and wording will often differ across languages. Nevertheless, the general images are often the same.

On the other hand, idioms that are derived from more specific domains are likely to differ across cultures, even cultures that are closely related. That is because not all domains from which idioms are derived have been equally important in all cultures. For example, English is particularly rich in expressions that are derived from the domain of sailing, and this is hardly surprising when we consider England’s long history as a seafaring nation. Another area where cultures differ is in the popularity of certain games and sports. English has a lot of idioms that are derived from the following domains:

Horse racing:
neck and neck it is hard to say who will win
win hands down to win easily
go off the rails to go wrong, out of control

Gambling:
raise the ante to increase the risk
hedge your bets to not take any risks
pay over the odds to pay too much