

## Investigating the Contextual Meaning of Idioms of Animals in Some Selected English Colloquial Utterances

Mahmood Atiya Farhan

University of Baghdad

College of Education/Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences

[mood5270@yahoo.com](mailto:mood5270@yahoo.com)

Received:17/1/2019

Accepted:3/3/2019

### Abstract

English is rich of idioms. Learning idioms is considered an integral part of vocabulary learning. Idioms of animals are very popular in everyday English and ESL and EFL learners should encounter them. The problem of this study is due to the fact that ESL and EFL learners may be unable to identify the intended meaning of idioms of animals since they are culture-bound and have colloquial sense. For example, “to beat a dead horse” has the abstract meaning talk about a topic other people think it is over whereas the contextual meaning is a failure or loser man. The current paper aims at identifying and figuring out the contextual meaning of idioms of animal. It is concluded:(1)ESL and EFL learners are unable to master these idioms because understanding their contextual meaning is difficult,(2) these idioms are culture-specific matter that needs further awareness of translators, ESL and EFL learners,(3)many ESL and EFL learners understand the literal meaning depending on dictionary meaning.

**Keywords:** contextual meaning , idioms of animals, colloquial utterances, ESL and EFL

## التحقق من المعنى السياقي للعبارات الاصطلاحية الدالة على الحيوانات في بعض الالفاظ الشعبية الانكليزية المختارة

م. محمود عطية فرحان  
جامعة بغداد / كلية التربية / ابن رشد للعلوم الانسانية

### الملخص :

تعد اللغة الانكليزية احدى اللغات التي تشتهر بالعديد من التعابير الاصطلاحية ، وان تعلم هذه التعابير هو جزء اساس لتعلم المفردات وان التعابير الاصطلاحية الدالة على الحيوانات هي من التعابير الشائعة في اللغة الانكليزية الشعبية لذلك ينبغي على متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية اوكلغة اجنبية ان يتواصلوا مع هذه التعابير الاصطلاحية وحقيقة الامر فان المشكلة الاساس التي تواجههم هو انهم لا يكونوا قادرين على التعرف على المعنى السياقي لهذه التعابير لأنها تعتمد على الخواص الثقافية فعلى سبيل المثال فان التعبير الاصطلاحي "to beat a dead horse" له معنى حرفي هو التحدث عن موضوع يعتقد الآخرون بأنه أصبح لأمعنى له. اما المعنى السياقي فيشير الى ان الشخص الذي يتكلم هو فاشل ولا هدف له . يهدف البحث الحالي الى التعرف على المعنى السياقي لمجموعة من التعابير الاصطلاحية الدالة على الحيوانات وقد توصلت الدراسة الى مجموعة من النتائج نذكر من بينها : ان متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لا يستطيعون تعلم هذه التعابير لان فهم السياق الذي تعتمد عليه هذه التعابير صعب وكذلك فان هذه التعابير مرتبطة ارتباطا وثيقا بالعوامل الثقافية وكذلك ان معظم متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية يصلون الى المعنى الحرفي عن طريق القاموس .

**الكلمات المفتاحية :** المعنى السياقي ، التعابير الاصطلاحية الدالة على الحيوانات ، الالفاظ الشعبية ، متعلمو اللغة الثانية ، متعلمي اللغة الاجنبية

## Literature Review

### Introduction

Idioms have a vast territory in a way that they can include many cultural aspects such as religious belief , culture-specific items , superstitions , and different ideologies of the people from diverse societies and nations. According to Yule (1996:199) an idiom is a group of words which has a different meaning from the meaning of its constituents.

### 1.1 Idioms : Definitions and Importance

Longman idioms dictionary (1998:121) defines idioms as “ a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understand each word separately”. According to Crystal (2003:223) an idiom is an

expression in which words do not have their literal meaning , but are categorized as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units.

Newmark (1988:104) considers idioms as extended metaphor and having main functions: pragmatic and referential .The pragmatic function is to appeal to the senses , to interest , to surprise , to delight .The referential function is to describe a mental processor state , a concept , a person , an object , more than is possible in literal or physical language .An idiom is affixed phrase whose form is usually unchangeable , and whose meaning is always the same , inflexible , metaphorical and indirect ( Ghazala ,2008:20)

## 1.2 Idioms of Animals

This research paper deals mainly with English idioms of animals which are considered critical for ESL and EFL teachers as wells learners. These idioms are the most commonly used in English. They include :

1. eat like a horse,
  2. an early bird ,
  - 3.take the bull by the horns ,
  - 4.let the cat out of the bag ,
  - 5.you cannot teach an old dog new tricks,
  6. Talk turkey ,
  - 7.Rat on somebody ,
  - 8.Keep the wolf from the door ,
  - 9.Cold fish ,
  - 10.A whale of time
- (Seidl,1988:197)

It is hypothesized that without a complete knowledge of these idioms in terms of social , cultural , historical and political contexts , ESL and EFL learners may not be able to understand the exact meanings of such idioms and thus they may not be able to figure out their contextual meanings.

## 2. Levels of Meaning

This paper is concerned with two levels of meaning , namely abstract meaning and the contextual meaning .The first one is the core study of Semantics , which studies the meaning of words and sentences literally .The second one is the main interest of Pragmatics which is concerned with these relations between language and context which might be grammaticalized in the structure of language (Levinson , 1983:19).

According to Thomas (1995:3) , there are two levels of meanings , the first level is “ abstract meaning “ which gives the literal meaning of a word , phrase and sentence, The second one is the contextual meaning which refers to the speaker’s communicative force. For example ,when we describe a person of being “ cold fish “ the abstract meaning is that he shows no emotion whereas the contextual meaning is that he is callous .

### 3. Methodology and Data Analysis

The current section is dedicated to the practical part of the research paper which provides research methodology , data analysis and results and discussion of the study.

#### 3.1. Participants

The study includes (30) Iraqi undergraduate learners of the department of English / college of Education /Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences/ university of Baghdad .They are chosen randomly and they are selected from fourth grade during the academic year (2018-2019) .The participants’ ages range from 20-47 .They are selected from both morning and evening studies .Table (3-1) below represents the distribution of participants according to variables of gender and age .

Variable	Category	No. of Students	Percentage
Gender	Male	9	30
	Female	21	70
	Total	30	100
Age	20-26 Male & Female	23	76.6
	27-33 Male & Female	3	10
	34-40 Male & Female	3	10
	41-47	1	3.4
	Total	30	100

Table (3-1) Distribution of participants according to variables of gender and age

#### 3.2 Materials

The materials used for this study consists of twelve idioms of animals which are downloaded from the internet and analyzed by using Thomas model of meaning (1995) to show the contextual meaning of each idiom .

### 3.3. Procedures

A suggested model for the present research paper is based on Thomas model of meaning (1995).The selected idioms of animals are (10) and are chosen because they are the most widely used in English language and selected from the internet .The main aim is to analyze these idioms according to the above mentioned model to investigate the contextual meaning of each idiom .

### 3.4 Tools

The tools used in this paper can be summarized as follows :

The researcher used (2 ) types of tests in order to assess the students' pragmatic competence or communicative knowledge of using idioms of animals and identify their contextual meaning together with their abstract meaning , hence a recognition test is used . It consists of (10) items of multiple choice question type .The participants are given (20) minutes to respond to this test (See appendix A) .The second type of test is a production test .This type is used to measure the students' ability to produce idioms of animals and measure their performance .The time specified for this test is (20) minutes (See appendix B).

### 3.5 Data Analysis and Discussion

The data will be analyzed according to the students' responses received for each test administrated to the participants . As to the production test , it is observed that most participants could not produce or write correct idioms of animals in well- formed sentences . This can be due to the fact that idioms are culture-specific matter that need much more care and awareness and it is difficult for participants to arrive at both abstract and contextual meaning . More specifically , participants failed to produce items ( 1,3,7,8 ) except these items ( 4,5,9) where participants are able to produce them correctly.

The subjects' responses in the production test are shown in table (3.2) below:

Item No.	Correct Responses No.	Incorrect Responses No.	Avoidance No.
1.	-	22	8
2.	3	17	10

3.	-	23	7
4.	8	13	9
5.	17	4	9
6.	7	13	10
7.	-	21	9
8.	2	23	5
9.	4	14	12
10	9	13	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>87</b>

As to the recognition test , it is found that the participants have committed less errors in choosing the correct answers . To put another way , most participants have chosen the correct responses of idioms of animals for items ( 6,9,10 ) which indicate their pragmatic competence .

Item No.	Correct Responses No.	Incorrect Responses No.	Avoidance No.
1.	14	10	6
2.	9	17	4
3.	3	20	7
4.	4	22	4
5.	12	11	7
6.	23	3	4
7.	17	7	6
8.	12	13	5
9.	24	2	4
10	20	6	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>51</b>

Table (3-3) illustrates the Subjects' Responses in the Recognition Test

Comparing the subjects' responses in both tests, it can be seen the number of incorrect responses in the production test ( 163 ) is greater than that in the recognition test ( 111 )

.This indicates that the participants are not able to produce idioms of animals because they are culture-specific matter and they carry the colloquial meanings .

The data will be analyzed according to Thomas model of meaning (1995) by investigate the abstract meaning and contextual meaning of idioms of animals . Accordingly , each idiom will be analyzed separately to extract its abstract and contextual meaning .The selected idioms of animals are (10) in number and they are as follows :

3.5.a Tom eats *like a horse* .

The abstract meaning of the above sentence is that Tom eats large quantities of food. Yet , the contextual meaning is that Tom is very greedy .

3.5.b My dad has been an *early bird* his whole life .

The abstract meaning is that my dad starts earlier than others . However , the contextual meaning shows that my dad is very opportunist and profiteer person .

3.5.c We decided to *take the bull by the horns* and go to court .

The abstract meaning of this sentence is that we decided to face difficult situation but the contextual meaning is that we are daring and adventurous persons .

3.5.d I accidentally *let the cat out of the bag* there.

The abstract meaning tells that “ I reveal a secret” , but the contextual meaning explains that “ I am eccentric person”.

3.5.e My grandmother does not want a computer .She says “ *you can't teach an old dog new trick*”.

The literal meaning of the italicized idiom is that people sometimes refuse to accept changes and innovations .Yet, the intended meaning is that those people are old-fashioned and creaky.

3.5.f If you are willing *to talk turkey*, the dispute between us can be easily settled .

The dictionary meaning of the above idiom indicates that we should talk seriously and frankly , but the pragmatic meaning of this idiom is that people should be honest and straightforward .

3.5.g John *ratted on me* , and I got in trouble

It is clear that the abstract meaning of the above idiom signifies that Jack betrays me However, the contextual meaning of that idiom is that is a snitch or whistle blower man .

3.5.h His household income can *keep the wolf from the door* .

The abstract meaning can be attributed to the fact that he earns enough money to provide his family whereas the contextual meaning refers to the fact that he is a successful freelancer .

3.5.i My neighbor is *a cold fish* .

It seems that the first type of meaning refers to the idea that my neighbor is someone who shows no emotions while the second type of meaning is that he is a hardhearted and callous person .

3.5.j I had *a whale of time* in London

The literal meaning of the above idiom is that I enjoy myself very much in London whereas the contextual meaning is that I am playful and sensualist man .

The following table summarizes the selected idioms of animals with their abstract and contextual meanings:

	<b>Idioms of Animals</b>	<b>Abstract Meaning</b>	<b>Contextual Meaning</b>	<b>Examples</b>
1.	Eat like a horse	Eat large quantities of food	Greedy	Tom eats like a horse
2.	An early bird	Starts earlier than others	Opportunist and profiteer	My dad has been an early bird his whole life
3.	Take the bull by the horns	We decided to face difficulties	Daring and adventurous	We decided to take the bull by the horns
4.	Let the cat out of the bag	Reveal a secret	Eccentric and bizarre	I accidentally let the cat out of the bag there
5.	You can't teach an old dog new tricks	Refuse to accept changes and innovations	Old-fashioned and creaky	My grandmother does not want a computer. She says "you can't teach an old dog new tricks"
6.	Talk turkey	Talk seriously and frankly	Honest and straightforward	If you are willing to talk turkey , the dispute between us can be easily settled
7.	Rat on somebody	Betray or inform on	Snitch or whistle blower	John ratted on us , and I got in trouble
8.	Keep the wolf from the door	Earn enough money to provide his family	Successful freelancer	His household income can keep the wolf from the door
9.	A cold fish	Shows no emotions	Hardhearted and callous person	My neighbor is a cold fish
10	A whale of time	Enjoy very much time	playful and sensualist man	I had a whale of time in London

Table (3-4) Summary of Idioms of Animals with their Abstract and Contextual Meanings



### Conclusion

The paper has come up with the following :

1. It is found that most ESL and EFL learners are unfamiliar with idioms of animals; therefore they fail to produce and recognize their meanings .
2. It is evident that without knowledge of linguistic and pragmatic context in which these idioms are spoken or written .It is hard for learners to figure out their meanings.
3. ESL and EFL learners are unable to master these idioms of animals because understanding their abstract and contextual meanings are difficult and need more awareness and care.
4. These idioms are culture-specific matter that require much attention ,accuracy and practice.
5. The participants' responses in both recognition and production tests reinforce the belief that idioms of animals are problematic and difficult to recognize and produce .
6. The majority of the errors committed by the participants in both tests indicate that ESL and EFL learners are ignorant of the use and meaning of these idioms.

### References

- Ayto, J. (2010) *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* .Oxford University Press.
- Crystal , D. (2003) *A Dictionary of Phonetics and Linguistics* .Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ghazala ,H.(1995) *Translation as Problems and Solutions* .7<sup>th</sup> ed. Beirut :Dar wa Maktabat Al-Hilal.
- Fillmore , C. (1981) *Pragmatics* .Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson ,S. (1983) *Pragmatics* .Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Longman Idioms Dictionary* (1998) .Essex: Addison Wesley Longman .
- Newmark , P. (1988) *A Textbook of Translation* .London :Prentice Hall.
- Thomas , J. (1995) *Meaning in Interaction* .London : Longman

Yule , G. (1996) *The Study of Language* .Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Seidl,J. and McMordie W. (1988) *English Idioms* .5thed.Oxford :Oxford University Press.

### Appendix (A)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your time in doing this questionnaire. I would like to inform you that this is not a test .The results will be used for the purpose of my research and not to evaluate your knowledge of the English language. Your answers will be completely anonymous .Please , read the instructions very well and answer every question before you submit your answers.

Thank you for your cooperation and participation

Participant's Name :

Name of the College:

This questionnaire consists of three parts :

#### PART ONE

##### Demographic Information

- What is your gender ?       Male       Female
- What is your age group?                       
    20-26      27-33      34-40      41-47
- What is your type of study ?       Morning       Evening
- What is your educational degree ?  
 High school       Bachelors       Masters       Doctorate

#### PART TWO

(Recognition Test )

Choose the correct meaning of the idioms of animals ( written in italics ) :

1. Tom eats *like a horse* .  
a. Eat little   b. eat much   c. doesn't eat   d. greedy
2. My dad has been *an early bird* his whole life.  
a. Like a bird   b. very early   c. very late   d. opportunist
3. We decided to *take the bull by the horns*.  
a. Kill the bull   b. play with the bull   c. face problems   d. daring
4. I accidentally *let the cat out of the bag* there.  
a. Free the cat   b. lock up the cat   c. eccentric   d. reveal a secret
5. My grandmother does not want a computer. She says "*you can't teach an old dog new tricks*".  
a. You cannot accept old things   b. you accept new things   c. old-fashioned   d. open-minded
6. If you are willing to *talk turkey* , the dispute between us can be easily settled.  
a. To be narrow –minded   b. to be tough   c. to be upset   d. to be frank
7. John *ratted on us* , and I got in trouble.  
a. Help me   b. betray me   c. laugh at me   d. snitch
8. His household income can *keep the wolf from the door* .  
a. Keep the wolf away   b. get enough money   c. get little time to play   d. Successful freelancer
9. My neighbor is *a cold fish* .  
a. Good person   b. shows no emotion   c. callous   d. merciful .
10. I had *a whale of time* in London .  
a. I do not have time   b. have much time to play   c. I am very busy   d. playful

**Appendix (B)**  
**(Production Test )**

Complete the following idioms of animal:

1. ----- eat like a horse.
2. -----an early bird .
3. ----- take the bull by the horns.
4. ----- let the cat out of the bag .
5. ----- you cannot teach an old dog new tricks.
6. ----- talk turkey.
7. -----ratted on you .
8. ----- keep the wolf from the door .
9. ----- a cold fish .
10. ----- a whale of time .