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English Idioms and Colloquial Expressions
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Abstract

This paper aims at presenting some theoretical considerations on English idioms and colloquial expressions in general. The discussion is based on the author's foreign language learning and teaching experience and a review of what some renown linguists say on the issue. In the first place, the notions of formal and informal language and literal and nonliteral meaning are explained. Then the concepts of euphemism, idiom, metaphor, phrasal verb, proverb, and slang are presented as they occur in informal or colloquial speech and writing. Finally, it is concluded that these expressions are language- and culture-specific; therefore, they are usually learned through interaction with native speakers of a language, or they need to be taught to foreign language learners and their meaning often needs to be looked up in a dictionary.

English Idioms and Colloquial Expressions

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Learning a foreign language well is more than just learning the sounds, grammar and vocabulary of a language (*Grammatical or linguistic competence*); it demands that you also acquire or learn (a) the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse¹ and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances (*Discourse competence*); (b) knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and of discourse, i.e., an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction (*Sociolinguistic competence*); and (c) strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to imperfect knowledge of language rules or performance factors such as fatigue, distraction, and inattention (*Strategic competence*). These four types of competence together are referred to as *Communicative Competence* (Brown, 1994; Canale & Swain, 1980).

In this paper, I am going to be concerned with some aspects of sociolinguistic competence. In particular, I will concentrate first on the differences between formal and informal English and the notions of literal versus nonliteral meaning. Then I will touch on some manifestations of informal English, such as euphemisms, idioms, metaphors, phrasal verbs, proverbs, and slang

¹ **Discourse** means everything from simple spoken conversation to lengthy written texts.

Formal English and Informal English

No one speaks his or her native language in the same manner all the time; we all generally adapt our language to the topic being dealt with, the setting or situation in which we find ourselves, the social, political or religious status of person we are addressing (addressee) or degree of familiarity that we have with that person (Zapata Becerra, 2000). For example, adults speak one way to children and another way to adult friends and colleagues. What varies in these diverse situations is not simply tone of voice and vocabulary (the insertion of *please* and *thank you*, for example, in children's exchanges with adults) but syntax as well: the English professor who studiously adheres to noun-pronoun agreement rules when addressing students (*Everyone has his or her weakness*) may well kick up his or her heels at home and join the majority of English speakers in employing the "singular their" (*Everyone has their weakness*) (The Guide, n.d).

Similarly, when a teacher is lecturing, he or she pronounces quite carefully and slowly, avoids using contractions, tries to use syntactic constructions and words that can be understood by everybody, and so on (formal style). But as soon as that same person meets his or her friends at a party, he or she will speak more carelessly and rapidly, will use a lot of contractions, syntactic constructions and words typical of the situation or setting (informal style) (Zapata Becerra, 2000).

The variations of a person's speech or writing depending on the context in which the language is being used are referred to as **speech styles**, or simply **styles**.² Although not all

² Some linguists use the term **register** in this sense (cf. Richards et al, 1992).

linguists agree on the types of styles and their characterization, we have to admit that we all automatically adjust our language to the situations and people we deal with (Zapata Berra, 2000). Speech styles are often expressed in terms of **degrees of formality**, namely, formal, informal (or colloquial), and intimate. Following is a brief description of the main characteristics of formal English and informal English.

To start with, **formal English** is used in academic writing (e.g., essays, reports, resumes, theses, and the like), and formal social events such as public speeches, graduation ceremonies, and assemblies depending upon the topic. It is often characterized by the following features:

- a) It is more commonly used in writing than in speech.
- b) It follows the conventions of “standard” language; i.e., it uses language forms that often grammatically and lexically considered “correct” or agreed upon by most educated users of the language. For example,
 - b.1) Sentences are often long and complex;
 - b.2) Subject-verb agreement is observed;
 - b.3) Contractions are avoided;
 - b.4) The passive voice is often used (making it more impersonal);
 - b.5) It is better organized and thought out;
 - b.6) The past tense of modal auxiliaries is common, and so on.

- c) Clear and precise vocabulary is used; hence, clichés³, colloquialisms, idioms, phrasal verbs, proverbs and slang are avoided. Likewise, a lot of synonyms are used in order to avoid the repetition of the same words. Also, much vocabulary derived from French and Latin is used.
- d) Polite words and formulas like *Please, Thank you, Madam, Sir, Mr. /Mrs. /Miss/Ms, Would you mind...?, May I...?, Could you please...?*, etc. are often used in speech.
- e) When spoken, words are more carefully and more slowly pronounced than in informal English.

In contrast, **informal English** (also referred to as **colloquial English**) is “relaxed and friendly without being restricted by rules of correct behavior” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2000). It is suitable for ordinary conversations or letters to friends. Informal English is characterized by the following features:

- a) It is more used in everyday speech (esp., conversations) than in writing.
- b) It often violates the conventions of “standard” language. For example:
 - b.1) Sentences are often short (or choppy) and simple;
 - b.2) Subject-verb agreement is not necessarily observed;
 - b.3) Contractions and acronyms are very common;

³ **Clichés** are expressions that are overused (i.e., are used too often and have lost most of their meaning) (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2000). They are usually as metaphors, idioms, proverbs, and so on.

- b.4) The active voice is often used;
- b.5) The present tense of modal auxiliaries is common, and so on.
- b.6) It is less organized and thought out;
- c) Vocabulary use is somewhat liberal; hence, lots of clichés, colloquialisms, idioms, phrasal verbs, proverbs and slang are often used. Also, vocabulary derived from French and Latin is not common.
- d) Words that express rapport and familiarity are often used in speech, such as *brother, buddy, man, you know*, and the like.
- e) When spoken, words are less carefully and more quickly pronounced (often chopped) than in formal English (Lesson Plan, n.d.).

Literal Meaning and Nonliteral Meaning

In all languages, the meaning of words and sentences can be literal or nonliteral (Zapata Becerra, 2000). On the one hand, we say that a word has a **literal meaning** if we can easily identify its referent; i.e., we know to what person, animal, thing or event it makes reference, regardless of the fact that the person, animal, thing or event is real or imaginary; e.g., *man, dog, table, party*. Similarly, we say that an expression or a sentence has a literal meaning if we can understand its global meaning because we know the meaning of the individual words that form that expression or sentence; e.g., *A bottle of milk; The sun is shining; The dog chased the cat* (Zapata Becerra, 2000).

On the other hand, we say that a word has a **nonliteral** (or **figurative**) **meaning** if we cannot easily identify its referent because it depends on the context in which we find it;

e.g., *spring, boot; Dr. Smith is a **butcher***. Likewise, we say that an expression or a sentence has a nonliteral meaning if we cannot guess its global meaning, even if we know the meaning of the individual words that make it up. That is to say, its meaning depends on the context or situation in which we use or encounter the expression, and consequently it has to be learned as a whole; e.g., *This exercise is **a piece of pie**; I put my foot in my mouth; John spilled the beans*. (Zapata Becerra, 2000).

Among the language forms which usually have nonliteral meaning, we find euphemisms, idioms, metaphors, phrasal verbs, proverbs, and slang. They are part of what we call informal language and often used in colloquial speech. Below I describe each one of these language forms.

Euphemisms

In order to avoid the use of *taboo words* (i.e., terms which are not often used in public because they, and/or the things they refer to, are seen as offensive, obscene, or somewhat disturbing to listeners or readers), people use euphemisms (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998; O'Grady et al., 1997). A **euphemism** is a word or an expression that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant subjects (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998). For example, in many societies death is feared; thus instead of using the verb *to die*, people are more likely to use the phrasal verbs *to pass on* or *to pass away*, or metaphors such as *to give up the ghost*. Similarly, in order to avoid taboo words that relate to the bodily func-

tions, intimacy or private parts, people use Latinate terms⁴ or euphemisms like the ones presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Some euphemisms and their meanings

Euphemism	Meaning
privates (or private parts)	male or female genitals
to make love	to engage in sexual intercourse
to perspire	to sweat
to pass away (or to pass on)	to die
collateral losses	civilian casualties
to take a leak	to urinate
funeral director	mortician or undertaker
sales representative	salesperson
to have the telephone out of order	to have the telephone service cut off

We must warn that, from a linguistic point of view, the words of a language are not intrinsically clean, dirty, good or bad; they simply reflect individual or societal values and prejudices. The filth or beauty of a word resides in the ear or mind of the listener or reader, not in the word itself.

⁴ We should also note that the Latinate terms are used mostly by educated people not the common people.

Idioms

Idioms (or **idiomatic expressions**) are fixed sequences of words (phrases or sentences), with a fixed meaning that is not composed of the literal meaning of the individual words (cf. Cipollone et al., 1998); e.g., *to kick the bucket* means ‘to die’; *to pull someone’s leg* means ‘to tease someone’; *He’s in my bad books* means ‘He’s in disfavor with me’.

According to Long et al. (1979), **idioms** usually have the following **characteristics**:

1. Most idioms have only a nonliteral or metaphorical meaning; i.e., one cannot often discover their meanings by looking up the individual words in an ordinary dictionary. E.g., *The thieves took everything, so I was left really **up a gum tree*** (= in a difficult situation). However, some idioms have both a literal and a nonliteral meaning; e.g., *He **spilled the beans*** can mean (a) literally: ‘He allowed the beans to get out of a container and fall on the floor or other surface; (b) nonliterally: ‘He revealed a secret’.

2. Most idioms are more or less invariable or fixed, both in wording and in certain grammatical ways. That is to say, they function like lexical units or wholes. Because of this:

a. We cannot often make substitutions of synonymous words into idioms without loss of their idiomaticity or metaphorical meaning. E.g., in the idiom *John **gave up the ghost*** (= ‘John died’), we cannot replace *ghost* by *apparition* and say *John gave up the apparition*; it would no longer mean ‘to die’.

- b. We cannot often introduce modifiers (e.g., adjectives and adverbs) into idioms. E.g., in the idiom *He let the cat out of the sack* (= 'he revealed a secret'), we cannot say *He let the black cat out of the sack*; it is no longer considered an idiom.
- c. They cannot often be used in the passive. E.g., *Mrs. Jones gave up the ghost* cannot be transformed into *The ghost was given up by Mrs. Jones*; it is no longer an idiom.
- d. Some idioms have slightly variant forms. E.g., We can say *until kingdom come* or *till kingdom come* (= 'for a very long time in vain') as in *You can protest till kingdom come; however, no one will pay attention to you*. Similarly, you can say *up to the/one's ears/eyes/neck/eyeballs* (= 'wholly concerned with something, esp. something troubling, work, business, or debt') as in *The secretary is up to her ears (in) addressing and stamping letters*. Another example is *to be in someone's good/bad books* (= 'to be in favor/disfavor with someone').
- e. Most idioms are entered in dictionaries or the lexicon as single items of vocabulary.
3. Most idioms belong to informal spoken or written language; therefore, they are generally avoided in formal speech or writing.

4. Most idioms are language- and culture-specific; i.e., they make sense or meaning mainly to the speakers of a given language or members of a given culture. Therefore, most idioms cannot be translated word for word into other languages.

Metaphor

A **metaphor** (or **metaphorical expression**) is a word, phrase or sentence which is used instead of other more common words, in order to describe or refer to a person, object, place, concept, etc. by likening them to other persons, objects, places, concepts, etc. in certain particular contexts (cf. Pei, 1966). The nonliteral meaning expressed through a metaphor is referred to as **metaphorical meaning**. For example, the following expressions are metaphors in English.

Table 2: Some metaphors and their meanings

<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
the big drink	the ocean or the sea
He's in the prime of life.	He's very young.
She is the apple of my eyes.	I love her more than anything else.
That car is a lemon.	That car often breaks down and requires constant repairs.
The stork is visiting Mary again	Mary is (pregnant and) expecting a child/baby again.
Walls have ears.	Others might listen to what you're saying, even if they're not in the same room.

Metaphors can be considered an expressive and subtle (sometimes indirect) way to say things or make reference to particular persons, objects, animals, places, concepts, ideas, etc. Metaphors can be used for many purposes; e.g., to embellish our speech or writing, to sound derogatory or pejorative, to praise someone or something, to sound humorous, etc. Notice the following metaphors:

It makes my heart ache to see her suffer. = It makes me sad to see her suffer.

Poor Mrs. Smith has gone to meet her Maker. = Mrs. Smith has died.

That little girl is an angel. = That little girl is a beautiful, innocent or kind person.

It is important to note that many metaphors are idioms. The main difference between these two types of expressions is that idioms are generally fixed sequences of words which function as wholes, while metaphors are not necessarily fixed sequences of words. That is to say, metaphors are more flexible expressions both from a lexical and a grammatical point of view.

Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are lexical units formed by a verb plus a preposition. The preposition has an adverbial function; therefore, it is often referred to as an *adverbial particle*. Phrasal verbs may have a literal meaning, but more often than not they have a nonliteral meaning, which cannot be guessed from knowing the meaning of its component elements; e.g., *I ran*

*across a strange piece of art in an old shop. No one knows what **brought about** his anger.*
*John is always **sucking up to** the boss. I won't **put up with** your rudeness.*

Proverbs

A proverb is “a short well-known statement that contains advice about life in general” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2000); e.g., *Every cloud has a silver lining. There's many a slip between cup and lip.* They are definitely culture-specific and cannot often be translated literally into another language; instead, equivalent expressions must be used. E.g., “No hay mal que por bien no venga.” “Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho.”

Slang

Slang is the style or register of language that consists of terms that can substitute for standard terms of the same conceptual meaning, but have stronger emotive impact than the standard terms, in order to express an attitude of self-assertion toward conventional order and moral authority and often an affinity with or membership in occupational, ethnic, or other social groups, and which ranges in acceptability from sexual and scatological crudity to audacious wittiness (cf. Chapman, 1987).

Mario Pei (1966) notes the following **characteristics of slang**:

- a. It is non-standard vocabulary characterized by extreme informality;
- b. Its currency is not limited to a region;

- c. It is composed of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, clipped forms, extravagant forced, or facetious (= amusing) figures of speech, verbal novelties;
- d. It is short-lived and therefore subject to decline into use;
- e. Generally, slang is only intelligible to those people associated with the group or groups who use it.

For example, slang is very common among adolescent and college students, in the army, among gang members, etc. O'Grady et al. (1997) gives us some examples of slang terms used in a US college (See Table 3 below).

Table 3: Some examples of American English slang.

Slang Term	Meaning	Slang Term	Meaning
buzz	feeling of pleasure or excitement (e.g., after drinking some alcohol)	bummed	depressed
bent	angry	booze	alcohol
fake-bake	tanning salon	pot	marijuana
gork	nerd	sucky	awful
chicken	coward	can	bathroom
homeboy	very close male friend	to have missile lock	to concentrate

It must be warned that slang terms vary from region to region and from time to time. Also, the practitioners of almost any trade and occupation usually have their own slangy expressions.

I JUNELIM
17-22 de Octubre de 2005
English Idioms and Colloquial Expressions
Prof. Argenis A. Zapata

Conclusions

English idioms and colloquial expressions are usually part of informal English. They have a figurative meaning and are considered to be language- and culture-specific; i.e., they have meaning or sense mostly among the speakers of a given language or members of a given culture. They are usually learned through interaction with native speakers of a language, or they have to be explicitly taught to people learning a foreign or second language, or the learners have to look them up in a dictionary. Likewise, idioms and colloquial expressions cannot often be translated word for word from one language into another. They generally appear in informal speech and writing.

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Appendix 1: Informal “Contractions”⁵

<i>Contraction</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Uncontracted Form</i>	<i>Examples</i>
'bout	bəʊt	about	He was talkin' 'bout you.
betcha	'betʃə	bet you	I betcha you dunno it.
'cause, cos, cuz	'kɔ:z, 'kɒz, 'kʌz	because	I left 'cause you didn't come on time.
c'mere	kə'mɪər	Come here!	John, c'mere!
c'mon	kə'mɒn	Come on!	C'mon, John!
could've, could of, coulda	'kʊdəv, 'kʊrəv, 'kʊrə kədəv, kərəv, kərə	could have (+ pp. form of verbs)	We could've helped Mary, instead.
couldja	'kʊdʒə	Could you...?	Couldja help me?
couldn't've, couldn't of, couldnta, couldna	'kʊdn̩təv, 'kʊdn̩tə, 'kʊdn̩ə	couldn't have (+ pp. form of verbs)	He couldn't've done that.
couldntcha	'kʊdn̩tʃə	Couldn't you..?	Couldntcha go?
d'you	dju:, dʒu, dʒə	Do you...?	D'you smoke?
didja	'dɪdʒə, dʒə	Did you...?	Didja see him?
didj'ave	dɪd 'jæv, dʒæv	Did you have...?	Didj'ave a good time?
dontcha	'dɒntʃə	Don't you...?	Dontcha love me?
dunno	də'nʊ, rə'nʊ	don't know	I dunno.
gimme	'gɪmɪ	give me	Gimme love.
gonna	'gɒnə, 'gʌnə	going to (+ verb)	I'm gonna sleep.
gotta	'gɒtə, 'gɔ:tə 'gɒtə, 'gɔ:tə	got to (+ verb)	I've gotta go now.
hafta	'hæftə	have to (+ verb)	I have to eat now. We have to go

⁵ These contractions are often used in informal spoken language; they should **never** be used in formal writing.

I JUNELIM
17-22 de Octubre de 2005
English Idioms and Colloquial Expressions
Prof. Argenis A. Zapata

			now.
hasta	'hæstə	has to (+ verb)	John has to eat now. She has to go now.
howdja	'haʊdʒə	How did you...?	Howdja get here?
kinda	'kɑɪndə	kind of	I'm kinda sad.
letcha	'letʃə	let you	I'll letcha do it.
lemme	'lemɪ	Let me	Lemme see it.
lotsa	'lɒtsə, 'lɒtsə	lots of	He ate lotsa grapes.
lotta	'lɒtə, 'lɒrə 'lɒtə, 'lɒrə	lot of	I need a lotta help.
meetcha	'mi:tʃə	meet you	I'll meetcha at three.
might've, might of, mighta	'maɪtəv, 'maɪrəv, 'maɪrə	might have (+ pp. form of verbs)	We might've done it.
must've must of, musta	'mʌstəv, 'mʌstə	must have (+ pp. form of verbs)	She must've been ill.
mustn't of, mustn't've, mustnta	'mʌsntəv, 'mʌsnəv, 'mʌsntə, 'mʌsnə	mustn't have (+ pp. form of verbs)	He mustn't've hit it.
needja	'ni:dʒə	need you	I needja.
oughta	'ɔ:tə, 'ɑ:rə, 'ɒtə, 'ɒrə 'ɔ:tə, 'ɔ:rə	ought to (+ verb)	We oughta go home.
should've, should of, shoulda	'ʃʊdəv, 'ʃʊrəv, 'ʃʊrə 'ʃədəv, 'ʃərəv, 'ʃərə	should have (+ pp. form of verbs)	They should've run.
shouldn't've, shouldn't of, shouldnta	'ʃʊdn̩təv, 'ʃʊdn̩tə	shouldn't have (+ pp. form of verbs)	I shouldn't've run.
sorta	sɔ:rtə, sɔ:rrə (AmE) 'sɔ:tə, sɔ:rə (BrE)	sort of	We're sorta bored.
supposta, s'posta	'spəʊstə, 'spəʊstə	supposed to	He s'posta be here by five.
useta	'ju:stə, 'ju:stə	used to	I useta live here.
waddaya	'wɒrəjə, 'wɑ:rəjə, 'wʌrəjə	What are you...? What do you...?	Waddaya say? Waddaya sayin'?

I JUNELIM
17-22 de Octubre de 2005
English Idioms and Colloquial Expressions
Prof. Argenis A. Zapata

wanna	'wʌnə, 'wɒnə, 'wʌnə	want to (+ verb)	I wanna go home.
wantcha	'wʌntʃə, 'wɒntʃə 'wʌntʃə	want you	I wantcha.
watcha	'wɒtʃə, 'wʌtʃə, 'wʌtʃə	what you, what you're, What are you...?	Whatcha said isn't true. Whatcha sayin'?
what'll	'wɒtɪ, 'wʌɪ, 'wʌɪ	What will...?	What'll you do?
when'll	'wenɪ	When will...?	When'll you come back?
wheredja	'weərdʒə	Where do you...?	Wheredja live?
where'll	'weəɪ	Where will...?	Where'll they go?
why'll	'waɪ	Why will...?	Why'll I do it?
wontcha	'wəʊntʃə	Won't you...?	Wontcha help me?
wouldja	'wʊdʒə, dʒə	Would you...?	Wouldja do it?
y'all	jɒl, jɔɪ	you (pl.), you all (in Texas)	Y'all know that.

Appendix 2: Exercises on English and Spanish Idioms and Colloquial Expressions

A. Give the appropriate *Spanish equivalent* of the following English idioms and colloquial expressions.

Watch out or they will clip you at that bar.	
My date for the dance was a cold fish .	
Our team creamed them badly.	
Mary has a crush on Paul.	
I need some dough before I can go Christmas shopping.	
The addict needs another fix .	
Paul cut/ditched class today.	
John went to jail for buying a hot car stereo.	
This computer program has a glitch .	
His salary is twenty grand .	
Out of sight, out of mind.	
Every cloud has a silver lining.	
His mannerisms suck .	
I'm beat !	
That pisses me off .	
John is sure thick .	
Have a splash while it lasts.	

B. Give the appropriate *English equivalent* of the following Spanish idioms and colloquial expressions.

Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho.	
Juan habla hasta por los codos.	
Vamos a echar una cana al aire.	
Cuando hay santos nuevos los viejos no hacen milagro.	
Aquí hay gato encerrado.	
Antes de que te cases, mira lo que haces.	
Este trago va por cuenta de la casa.	
No me tomes el pelo.	
A Juan lo agarraron con las manos en la masa.	
¿Quién te ha dado velas en este entierro?	
Al mal tiempo, buena cara.	
Pasé la materia de chiripa.	
Al que madruga Dios lo ayuda.	
Metí la pata.	
Estoy entre la espada y la pared.	
Juan compró su casa con el sudor de su frente.	
No le echas la culpa a María.	