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Creative use of idioms in satirical magazines

The article presents modified idioms found in two satirical magazines: *The Private Eye* and *The Week*. Modifications are not institutionalized and are thus rarely found in phraseological dictionaries. Creative modifications of idioms are made by an individual speaker or writer who intends to achieve a particular effect. The production and reception of modified idioms makes great demands on the producer of modifications as well as on their receiver. This study shows that idioms are mostly expanded by adding one or more elements to the base form. In some cases of modification the base form remains intact; in others it is changed to a great extent. Modified idioms add to the stylistic effect of a text, which manifests itself in the intensification of the message.

Key words: idioms; modification; expansion; stylistic effect; satirical magazines.

1. Introduction

Idiomatic expressions pose many semantic and structural problems. The most familiar difficulty is that of meaning, since idiomatic expressions do not mean what they appear to mean. Because they have a special meaning attached to them, it is not possible to understand the meaning of the whole simply by understanding the meaning of the constituent parts. In this respect, they are similar to a word: they must be learnt by memorizing their stipulated meaning. They are figures of speech that contradict the principle of compositionality and as such, they are often regarded as fossilized, petrified or frozen lexical items. Idiomatic

expressions, especially proverbs, sayings, catchphrases and slogans, may be manipulated to achieve a variety of striking effects, such as surprise, irony, novelty, humour (cf. Gläser 1986: 46–47; Naciscione 2010: 26; Omazić 2008: 74) or as Omazić (*ibid.*: 74) puts it “to fill empty contextual slots, or for pure enjoyment of language play.”

Idiomatic expressions are often modified to enhance the memorability of slogans in commercial advertising and are fairly popular also in journalism, particularly in newspaper headings to spark the reader’s curiosity (cf. Gläser 1986: 46–48). However, modifications of idiomatic expressions can also be found in a variety of other text types, ranging from advertisement and newspaper articles to prose fiction and public speeches. The fact that modifications are not as infrequent as it appears and that they appear in numerous texts encountered on a daily basis leads to the question whether they are included and treated in dictionaries, particularly in specialized phraseological dictionaries, and various teaching materials, especially textbooks. This is important, since as figures of speech they tend to confuse those not already familiar with them, especially students of a foreign language who must learn its idiomatic expressions the way they learn its other vocabulary. Modifications pose problems not only to foreign learners, but also to native speakers, since the meanings of modifications cannot be directly retrieved from the hearer’s or listener’s mental lexicon; that is why some degree of linguistic processing is required. Gläser (2001: 132) points out that in many cases, the native speaker’s linguistic competence and stylistic experience and intuition may be a clue to the stylistic potential of an idiomatic expression in its communicative setting. The meanings of the constituents must be accessed and used in some fashion to derive the meaning of the idiom. This strategy involves the following six steps (cf. Glucksberg 2001: 77; Omazić 2008: 73):

1. recognition of the idiom as a modification of a conventional idiom,
2. retrieval of the meaning of the original idiom,
3. identification of the constituent meanings of both the variant and the original idioms,
4. comparison of the constituent meanings of the two idiom forms,
5. identification of the relation(s) between those meanings (e.g., verb tense, quantification, negation)
6. on the basis of this relation, inference of the relation between the meanings of the original and variant idioms.

The aim of this article is to examine various issues of satirical magazines to find out whether modifications of idioms appear in this text type, what kind of modifications are used and how frequent each modification is.

2. Methods

For the purpose of this research, ten randomly chosen issues of two satirical magazines, i.e. *Private Eye* (referred to as *PE*) and *The Week*, were studied. Satirical magazines were chosen because our initial hypothesis was that this type of magazine abounded with modifications of idioms, since modifications which appear in cartoons, newspapers, magazines or in booklets are often based on allusions to originally idiomatic expressions and serve as a source of political and social satire (cf. Gläser 1986: 49). In the issues studied, 102 modified idioms were found. The modifications were identified as those forms that differ from the base form of an idiom. The base form of an idiom is a form to which other forms of an idiom can be related and with which they can be compared, that is the form of an idiom found in a dictionary (cf. Naciscione 2001: 22). The dictionaries taken as the ultimate authority for establishing the base forms were the phraseological dictionaries *Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English*, *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* and *Longman Idioms Dictionary* as well as monolingual learner's dictionaries *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. The modified idioms represent the database used in our research. The modifications were then classified according to the type of modification. This enabled us to determine what kinds of modification appear in our database and consequently, to perform a statistical analysis to establish the frequency of each type of modification.

3. Variation vs. modification

According to Moon (1998: 122), many idioms are semi-fixed, or partially variable, in their form. Variability may mean the possibility of substituting one word or several words at one or more points. Knowing how many words, and which words, to substitute is important for the learner, because failure to make the right choices may result in combinations that no native speaker would produce. Even though fixedness is a key property of idioms, many of them have lexical variations or strongly institutionalized transformations. Variations are not ad hoc manipulations like modified idioms; they are institutionalized, although some may be restricted to particular varieties of English or formality levels. The most important characteristic concerning the expressive use of idioms is creative manipulation of their form. Cowie (2001: 12) states that deliberate variation of an idiom to achieve a particular stylistic effect is a common device in speech and writing and is to be distinguished from variation within a multi-word unit, which is familiar and systemic (and recorded as such in phraseological dictionaries).

Creative modification and the associated play on literal and transferred meanings are always tied to a specific context. Idioms are creatively modified where the lexis is stylistically manipulated for stylistic effect, to make them more appropriate in their context or simply to pun. For that reason, they are very noticeable in a text and therefore attract readers' attention. The stylistic use of idioms is not a violation or an infringement, but a deliberate choice, a new perception, a different point of view (cf. Naciscione 2001: 8).

Glucksberg (2001: 81) suggests that, in general, phraseological units that are compositional and transparent tend to be syntactically and lexically flexible. However, even those idioms whose constituents cannot be mapped individually onto their idiomatic meanings can be used productively. This is possible because the semantics of the phrase as a whole has a direct functional relation with the idiom's meaning. Semantic productivity can thus be independent of compositionality and transparency. What matters is the communicative intention that motivates a speaker/writer to employ a modification, meaning that syntactic and lexical flexibility may be relatively independent of idiom type. Syntactic operations must be motivated by communicative intent, so any changes that they produce in an idiom's meaning must be interpretable in context. People modify idioms not only to communicate propositional content but also to reflect upon and express attitudes and emotions.

Failure to identify the base form may lead to inaccuracy in interpretation. The base form is a stable formation existing outside discourse and is stored in the long-term memory of the language user. It is the form that the language user recalls when a text situation calls for it. Another important term is the "core use" of an idiom, which denotes the most common form and meaning of an idiom (cf. Naciscione 2001: 23). The base form of an idiom is a form outside discourse, whereas the core use is the use of an idiom in its most common form and meaning. In core use, an idiom functions without any additional stylistic changes and has the same stylistic effect as the base form. Once the idiom has been identified, the core use is predictable.

Modification is a boundless resource for the writer's or speaker's creativity and can thus be stretched very far, provided that the base form is recognizable, that cohesion and coherence are not endangered and that the stylistic effect endures. Where communicative intent cannot be inferred, listeners/readers may either fail to recognize the idiom itself or recognize it but view the modified utterance as a mistake by the speaker/writer. The modification will be productive if the relation between the original constituents and their substitutes and the modification is viewed as intentional, not inadvertent.

4. Patterns of modified idioms in discourse

As has already been mentioned, one of the aims of this research is to take a closer look at the modified idioms found in both satirical magazines and to describe different patterns of modification. In the case of modified use of idioms, which plays a special role in the creation of texts, it is necessary to establish the manner of interaction between the idiom and other elements in the text in order to find out why an idiom was modified and what effects were thus created. Modified idioms add to the cohesion, and their meaning lies in the context.

There is no fixed classification of modification of idioms, but for the purpose of our research we based our classification on that of Burger et al. (1982). At the same time, we intended to find out whether Burger's classification can be applied to all examples that constitute our database or whether some aspects of this classification should be refuted or modified in some way.

4.1. *Word substitution*

In this type of modification one or more words of an idiom are replaced by another word or words, which usually have something in common with the replaced word or words. However, it is not difficult for the reader/listener to recognize the base form of the modified idiom because the rest of it remains the same. With a new discursive form, the idioms acquire a new meaning and stylistic effect.

a. Verb substitution:

The majority of idioms belonging to the group 'Word substitution' undergo a change in the verb:

- (1) *So profitable has the business become, and such are the prospects as NHS hospitals lay off staff and cut back operations, the private equity industry – never slow to spot a fast buck – is stepping in.* (PE: 12/05–25/05/06; p. 27)

make a fast/quick buck – (informal, often disapproving) earn money quickly and easily

Besides verb substitution, idioms may also experience some grammatical changes in order to comply with the requirements of the modified unit:

- (2) *The Treasury will soon have to lift its head from the sand and face up to the multi-billion pound costs of companies challenging British tax law in the European courts.* (PE: 14/04–27/04/06; p. 6)

bury/hide your head in the sand – refuse to deal with unpleasant realities, possible dangers, etc., by pretending they do not exist

Both the meaning and form of these units are determined by the context. Although the base form does not remain intact, it is not difficult for the reader to recognize the base form, which is essential for an understanding of the modification. Such modified units convey new shades of meaning and work for greater cohesion of the text.

b. Adjective substitution:

It is common for an adjective to be replaced either by another adjective or by some other part of speech:

- (3) *The Funny Old World column achieved new heights of surrealism in this week's Eye (1156) with the piece about the alien allegedly robbing slippers from schoolgirls' lockers in Japan.* (PE: 28/04–11/05/06; p. 16)

the dizzy heights (of sth) – (humorous) an important or successful position

This is often used to show that the position is not really very impressive.

c. Pronoun substitution:

The pronoun *it*, which is a constituent element of the idiom 'it will all come out in the wash', is replaced by the pronoun *this* to refer back to the previous paragraph:

- (4) *Worse, the BBC's occupational health department, which is responsible for running the scheme, has itself been outsourced too – well, you guessed it. No doubt this will all come out in the wash when Radio 4's File on Four investigates the disaster-prone outsourcer later this month.* (PE: 14/04–27/04/06; p. 10)

it will (all) come out in the wash – (spoken) used to make sb less anxious by telling them that any problems or difficulties will be solved in the future

4.2. *Expansion*

In this type of modification, idioms are expanded mostly by adding adjectives, adverbs or prepositional phrases to the base form in order to bring the idiom closer to the text or simply to add more information to it. The base form remains largely intact.

a. *Premodifier:*

The idiom is expanded by adding a premodifier. In this way, the author adds more information to its meaning:

- (5) ... *Alistair Mackintosh, Manchester City's chief (presumably still grateful that Sport England footed a £165m bill for the 2002 Commonwealth Games, including the very stadium which Man City now play in).* (PE: 17/02-02/03/06; p. 8)

foot the bill (for sth) – be responsible for paying the cost of sth

The change in the above idiom also causes a change in the articles. Because of the premodifier added to the nominal headword, the original definite article can be replaced by the indefinite one.

Another way of expanding idioms is by adding an adverb to the base form:

- (6) *Jodi Picoult, author of a dozen decently received works and the winner of a New England Book Award back in her native land, was more or less unknown to English readers until the moment when, quite out of the blue, 'My Sister's Keeper' got picked for 'Richard and Judy'.* (PE: 17/02-02/03/06; p. 35)

out of the blue – suddenly and unexpectedly

b. *Postmodifier:*

In all the examples found, the postmodifying structure is a prepositional phrase:

- (7) *That's when I had the great idea. It came like a flash from heaven.* (PE: 17/02-02/03/06; p. 34)

in/like a flash – (informal) very quickly; suddenly

c. Premodifier and postmodifier:

Idioms expanded by both a premodifying and a postmodifying structure provide more information than their base forms would if used in these texts:

- (8) *The House of Lords appointments commission clearly shared these doubts, continually holding up the honours list in which Townsley was due to appear. After a three-month battle of wills between the commission and Downing Street, Townsley has at least withdrawn his name from the list of nominations, blaming “media abuse.”* (PE: 17/02–02/03/06; p. 5)

a battle of wills – a competition, an argument or a struggle where each side is very determined to win

4.3. Shortening

In most cases belonging to this type of modification, it is the verbal part of the idiom that is omitted. Usually the verbs *to be* or *to have* are omitted, since they mostly have only a grammatical function and bear no great relevance to the understanding of the meaning of the unit. The writers make use of the reader's knowledge, since in most cases one part of an idiom is enough for the reader to recall the whole structure. The use of elliptical forms in headlines can also be explained by the “economical” syntax that is typical of journalistic language and especially of the headlines.

The majority of shortened idioms were found in headlines. This certainly means that elliptical use in headlines is a favourite pattern for media journalists. It catches the eye of the reader and commands attention. Furthermore, it brings the idea of the text to the fore and also invites the reader to read the whole article. When occurring in the headlines, a modified unit acquires significance for the whole text.

- (9) Salt in the wound (PE: 31/03-13/04/06; p. 27)

rub salt into the wound/into sb's wounds – make sb who is already feeling upset, angry, etc. about sth feel even worse

It is possible that, besides being shortened (i.e. lacking the verbal part), an idiom can also be used as a premodifier in a nominal phrase, which is not its usual position:

- (10) *No doubt Tessa Jowell has other things on her mind right now. But if the culture secretary can spare a thought during her now lonely breakfast in Kentish Town, she might direct it toward the off-the-rails behaviour of her Number 2 at the DCMS: the fiercely ambitious David Lammy. (PE: 17/03–30/03/06; p. 12)*

go off the rails – (BrE, informal) start behaving in a way which shocks or upsets other people

It is also possible that idioms lack their prepositional phrases, which again does not prevent the reader from understanding the meaning:

- (11) *No wonder the Department of Health gives itself a clean bill when it comes to its handling of the contaminated blood scandal which condemned thousands of haemophiliacs to death and prolonged illness from HIV and hepatitis C (see last Eye). (PE: 31/03–13/04/06; p. 10)*

a clean bill of health – a statement that sb is well or sth is in a satisfactory condition

4.4. Grammatical modification

Constituent parts of some idioms studied or, in some cases, the whole idiom are grammatically changed. According to this study, there are four different types of grammatical modification:

a. Idioms belonging to the first type of grammatical modification have all experienced a process of nominalization. Originally verbal idioms have been replaced by nominal modifications. This kind of modification is a creative way to attract the reader's attention:

- (12) *On the other hand events in Serbia are providing many side-splitting laughs in the smoke-filled coffee shops of Pristina. (PE: 14/04–27/04/06; p. 17)*

split your sides (laughing/with laughter) – laugh a lot; laugh loudly

It is also possible that the modified idiom is not used as an independent nominal phrase but as a premodifier in a nominal phrase:

- (13) *Yet again Greenberg moved in with a hand-washing briefing: ... (PE: 14/04–27/04/06; p. 11)*

wash your hands of sb/sth – refuse to deal with or be responsible for sb/sth any longer

- b. The writer may change a degree of comparison, so instead of using the base form of the adjective in the idiom, the comparative is used:

- (14) *The woman with the face transplant was in the papers today. I thought she would keep a lower profile.*

adopt, keep, etc. a high/low profile – try /try not to attract other people's interest, attention, etc.

- c. The noun in an idiom may undergo a change in number:

- (15) *Now Brown has decided on nationwide free travel, to be implemented in 2008. He could have avoided much costly admin by copying the Welsh scheme in the first place – but then he wouldn't have had two bites of the cherry. (PE: 31/03–13/04/06; p. 26)*

a bite at/of the cherry (also *a second/another bite at/of the cherry*) – (BrE) an opportunity to do sth, or a second attempt at doing sth, especially sth you have failed to do earlier

- d. An idiom may be made passive:

- (16) *The sound of Labour's top fundraiser Lord Levy calling for state funding of political parties is the sound of the bottom of the barrel being scraped. (PE: 17/03–30/03/06; p. 3)*

scrape (the bottom of) the barrel – (disapproving) use things or people of a low quality because all the good ones have already been used

4.5. Coordination

This type of modification deals with combining partially identical idioms. In order to combine two or more idioms, they have to possess at least one identical element which is used only in one idiom and omitted in the second. However,

there are still two idioms, but one of them retains its base form and the other one is found in the elliptical form:

- (17) *It's a miracle. I am over the hill ... I mean the moon.* (PE: 12/05–25/05/06; p. 19)

over the hill – (informal) no longer young; past your best

be over the moon – (informal, especially BrE) be very happy and excited

4.6. *Combination of different types of modification*

Often two or more types of modification are applied to one idiom. In this way the semantic message carried by a modified unit is intensified. This mixture, however, sometimes makes it difficult to tell the different types of modification apart.

In this study, the following combinations of types of modification were found:

a. *Expansion and grammatical modification:*

- (18) *Opposition councillors have forced an investigation by the council's monitoring officer and external auditor Price-Waterhouse Cooper has been called in.* Will the carpets at Flintshire CC be wide enough for all the things that need to be swept under them? (PE: 17/03–30/03/06; p. 11)

sweep/brush sth under the carpet – (informal) hide sth which might cause trouble, or which you do not want other people to know

b. *Expansion and shortening:*

- (19) *The harmony between ministers and the BLF may have the Play Council purring, but others in the voluntary sector are furious that the government's sticky fingers are in the lottery pot.* (PE: 17/03–30/03/06; p. 7)

have sticky fingers – (informal) be likely to steal sth

c. *Word substitution and grammatical modification:*

- (20) *Meanwhile, the district valuer – a scion of the Inland Revenue – has produced a report which strongly suggests that the "tin-can towers" scheme*

is unviable. Skidrow council would be left with egg on its face. (PE: 28/04–11/05/06; p. 13) (the verb used in the modification is passivized)

(have) egg on your face – (informal) be made to look stupid

- (21) *Under most record contracts, the record company owns a recording outright for 50 years and the artist gets no say on whether it's available or not. (PE: 28/04–11/05/06; p. 11) (the noun in the modification is negated)*

have your say – (informal) give your opinion about sth

d. *Word substitution and expansion:*

- (22) *“The Royal College of Organists (RCO) has suffered a “substantial deterioration” in its finances after an abortive move to Birmingham blew a \$840,000 hole in its wallet.” (PE: 31/03–13/04/06; p. 12)*

make a hole in sth – (informal) to use a large part of an amount of money

5. Analysis of the database examples

Creative modifications of idioms are made by an individual speaker/writer who intends a particular effect. The production as well as reception of modified idioms makes great demands on the producer of the modifications as well as on their receiver. Although modifications are not institutionalized and are thus rarely found in phraseological dictionaries (cf. Naciscione 2010: 24–30), they play an important role in everyday language, which is confirmed by the results obtained when analysing the database examples collected for the purpose of our study.

Expanded idioms consisting of a base form and an expanding element make up a remarkable 41.2 % of the total. The second most frequent type of modification is grammatical modification, which represents 25.5 % of the total number of modified idioms. This is followed by word substitution with 20.6 %. Shortened idioms make up 11.8 %, whereas coordination represents only 0.9 %.

The group of expanded idioms is the most numerous one, which can be explained by the fact that this kind of modification is the simplest way of modifying idioms. The base form of an idiom remains intact in the majority of cases. It is mostly expanded by adjectives, adverbs or prepositional phrases in order to

bring the idiom closer to the text or simply to add more information to the meaning of an idiom. For more detailed information, see Table 1.

Table 1. Types of modification in database texts (in %).

Type of modification	Database examples	Results in %
1. Word substitution	21	20.6
2. Expansion	42	41.2
3. Shortening	12	11.8
4. Grammatical modification	26	25.5
5. Coordination	1	0.9
Total	102	100

In our research, we found that satirical magazines represent a rich source of modified idioms, which add to the imagery of a text. This finding confirms our initial hypothesis. The potential of modified idioms is enormous. The analysis of the corpus examples shows three major groups in terms of discourse function:

1. Modifications add to the stylistic effect of the text, which manifests itself in an intensification of the message, as for instance in the example where the writer modified the idiom *shut/close the door on sth* ('make it unlikely that sth will happen; refuse to consider an idea, a plan, etc') by replacing the verb *close/shut* with the verb *slam*:

(23) *The very moment when we see fossil fuels beginning to run out might seem a perfect cue for our idiotically blind government to slam the door on Diesel's prediction.* (PE: 17/02–02/03/06; p. 15)

The verbs *slam*, *shut* and *close* all have a similar meaning; however, the verb *slam* with the meaning 'to shut, or to make sth shut, with a lot of force, making a loud noise' is semantically stronger and is used in this context to make the meaning of the idiom even stronger and more expressive.

2. There is a semantic difference in meaning, often a slight one, as in the example where the verb *grind* in the idiom with the base form *grind to a halt/standstill* ('stop slowly') is replaced by the verb *stutter*, with the meaning 'to move or start with difficulty, making short sharp noises or movements':

(24) *Billed in Radio Times to run for 60 minutes, the opening episode stuttered to a halt after 50 and was then filled with 10 minutes of behind-the-scenes featurettes about the marvellous camera chaps and other personnel who had brought us the pictures we'd just seen.* (PE: 17//03–30/03/06)

The text is about the opening episode of an unsuccessful TV show that lasted only fifty minutes instead of the expected sixty. The writer uses the verb *stutter* because it means that the show was already coming to an end at the very beginning, which means it had difficulties even from the opening.

3. The modifications carry more semantic information than their phraseological bases. This function is typical of expanded idioms, where expanding elements are added to the phraseological base form, which mainly remains intact.

To make it clear how much money Sport England paid for the 2002 Commonwealth Games, the idiom *foot the bill (for sth)* ('be responsible for paying the cost of sth') was expanded by the premodifier *£165m*, with the help of which the author adds more information to its meaning:

(25) ... *Alistair Mackintosh, Manchester City's chief (presumably still grateful that Sport England footed a £165m bill for the 2002 Commonwealth Games, including the very stadium which Man City now play in).* (PE: 17/02–02/03/06; p. 8)

Another thing that has to be pointed out is that the analysis of our database shows that Burger's classification is comprehensive enough to cover all the groups of modified idioms found in satirical magazines and included in our study.

6. Conclusion

As Gläser (2001: 130) points out, creative modifications of idioms are made by an individual speaker or writer who intends to achieve a particular effect. These changes to the basic forms of an idiom and the associated playing with its literal and transferred meaning are always bound to a particular textual environment. Here, they can deploy their stylistic potential.

Articles in satirical magazines include a wide variety of devices aimed at attracting and retaining the reader's attention and interest. Clearly, a much larger database is needed to draw more valid conclusions, and satirical magazines appear to be a rich source for the deployment of phraseology for producing different effects. This analysis and database evidence are valuable, since they confirm that, as far as modifications are concerned, the forms of idioms are by no means as fixed as many dictionaries appear to suggest. Established norms of fixity are always liable to be set aside by creative language users. The study of idioms and

their modifications can tell us increasingly more about the nature of fixed expressions, figurative language and, finally, of language itself.

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KREATIVNA UPORABA IDIOMA U SATIRIČKIM MAGAZINIMA

U ovom članku prikazat ćemo preinačene idiome u dvama satiričkim časopisima: *The Private Eye* i *The Week*. Preinake nisu institucionalizirane i stoga ih je teško naći u frazeološkim rječnicima. Kreativne preinake idioma djelo su pojedinca ili pisca koji time želi postići poseban učinak. Stvaranje je i razumijevanje preinačenih idioma zahtjevan proces, kako za tvorca takvih idioma tako i za njihove interpretatore. U ovoj ćemo studiji pokazati da se idiomi najčešće proširuju dodavanjem jednoga ili više elemenata njihovom temeljnom obliku. U nekim je slučajevima temeljni oblik ostao neizmijenjen; u drugima, pak, on je izmijenjen u značajnom opsegu. Preinačeni idiomi doprinose stilističkom učinku teksta, što se očituje u pojačanju učinka same poruke.

Ključne riječi: idiomi; preinaka; proširenje; stilistički učinak; satirički časopisi.