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IDIOM AS INSTRUMENT OF PERSONAL APPROACH(Is the Greek *ἰδίωμα* a legitimate begetter of the modern English Idiom?)

These few lines will try to demonstrate — very briefly and fragmentarily — that idioms, in the most current sense of the word, are such forms of colloquial word expression as are best capable of personal approach. Our lines will also enlist, as an ordinary private does, in the countless army of volunteers endeavouring to fix for the modern — not historical — conception of the term “idiom” proper boundaries of its government and jurisdiction. And finally, let them be kindly tolerated as a somewhat uncommon — perhaps in the eyes of some readers inappropriate — attempt to show that even an intellectual problem can be treated, as to wording, with liberal participation of idioms.

Summing up this would-be introduction we beg to point out that our brief essay is utterly void of scientific ambition, being just a butterfly of reasoning, attracted to the sweetly smelling flower of idiomatic utterance, while the act of its alighting on the blossom is, in fact, more psychological than philological.

Now, the impulse of this brief treatise is, strange to say, a personal one, and even this fact itself may be classified by the ironically-minded theoreticians as “idiomatic”. If it will, let them enjoy their classification. I am even willing to go so far as to believe that within the scope of definitions every genuine and original humour that happens to find a fitful word garment is bound to be recognized as “idiomatic” in the world of speech phenomena.

Before undertaking a minor territorial campaign let us advance to the skirmish just a handful of individuals — warrior idioms in our case — in accord with the practice of knightly honour in ancient and medieval battles.

Here they march: Those who know more intimately the esteemed victim of our celebration may recognize in them some members of his own Life-Guards. And — which is important for our argumentation — these idioms belong, I believe, to the undisputed and generally acknowledged species that would hardly be denied the idiomatic citizenship by anyone.

“Let us congratulate him on the well deserved respect and interest of friends and

fellow-workers on this memorable occasion," says he who is in command of the detachment.

"Here, here!" fall in the rest.

"Present arms, one by one," proceeds the commander.

The order is complied with.

1. Many happy returns of the day.

2. Long live he who knows how to live and who has not been living in vain.

3. He knew how to keep his head.

4. We never remember him having a swelled head,

5. nor beating his head against a wall.

6. Yet he could make head against improprieties when he thought it right.

7. He need not rack his brains when sitting in a café in a friendly company.

He is a first-class companion, you know.

8. Anyway, he at least has brains to rack. Some people are in the habit of racking their vacuum, which is rather painful.

9. Upon the whole, he is not a hair splitter, but you had better beware of airing your amateur views on Medieval Latin in his presence.

10. His tranquil face seems to have made friends with ideas and books without the sweat of the brow.

11. Nevertheless, occasionally he can knit his brows when pondering over human stupidity.

12. Number Ten spoke of his tranquil face. Yes, of course, the face is all right, even though bearded. He certainly need not save it.

13. When reading this with some friend interpreter, he will simply have to put a good face upon it, I suppose. What else can he do?

14. Maybe, he will say: Oh, leave faces alone. As to me, I am more used to look facts than idioms in the face, I am afraid.

15. Let us think of his eyes; sometimes they look so boyish. But I believe he does have an eye for everything that is really lovely and interesting.

16. I never knew him turning a blind eye, or a deaf ear, for that part, to anything that was worth noticing.

17. Oh yes, and do not ask him to shut his eyes to anything that really deserves condemning.

18. He rather likes to make friends with eye—openers,

19. but he does not seem to care too much for what he looks like in the public eye.

20. Well, well, by congratulating him on these pages we hope we shall not send him away with a flea in the ear.

A brief philological and psychological analysis of the Life-Guards will be attempted later.

Now, let us just cast a glimpse at the rather obscure pilgrimage of the Modern

Idiom from the Ancient Greek vocabulary via Latin and French to the living tongues of today, represented in our case by English.

In the New English Oxford Dictionary we read: *ιδίωμα* peculiarity, property, peculiar phraseology; *ιδιώεσθαι* to make one's own, to appropriate; *ιδίος* own, private, peculiar. H. W. Fowler suggests in his *Modern English Usage* that "the closest possible translation of the Greek word is: a manifestation of the peculiar." Other quotations may be reproduced to a similar effect.

The semantic radiation of our word group — both the original form and the derivatives — seems to have had two closely adjoining foci as early as then:¹ one's own or proper — and peculiar in the sense of particular, uncommon. The first focus appears in the eyes of interpreters to be the more traditional one, the right-wing view, so to say, while the second is left-wing and definitely progressive. The pilgrimage proceeds to Rome, assuming the Latin form *idioma*, which, according to O. D. was also used for some time in English. Then there are the French forms *idiome* and *idiotisme*, of which the latter paid a flying visit to the English 17th cent. vocabulary as *idiotism*, having its entry and exit alike. Logan Pearsall *Smith* in his *Words and Idioms* (reprinted last in 1947) remarks: "We also use 'idiom' for the meaning expressed by the French word *idiotisme*, that is to say, those forms of expression, of grammatical construction, or of phrasing which are peculiar to a language, and approved by its usage, although the meanings they convey are often different from their grammatical and logical signification. As we have no longer a word in English corresponding to *idiotisme*, I shall use 'idiom' in this chapter in its narrower sense, meaning the idiosyncrasies of our language, and, above all, those phrases which are verbal anomalies, which transgress, that is to say, either the laws of grammar or the 'laws of logic'. In remark 1 on the same page the author expresses the regret that "as it (*idiotism*) implies vulgarity by its etymology and suggests idiocy by its relation to 'idiot' it is not a happy word; but the distinction it marks is a useful one, and it is a pity that we have no term like, for instance, the Spanish *modismo* for it."

By taking this view of the problem L. P. Smith definitely appears as spokesman of the left-wing, progressive interpretation. To be sure, he is far from denying the more historical and traditional definitions, stressing the national, tribal, or other collective singularity of the phenomenon the right to exist or to assert their claims in theoretical philology, but as a lover and interpreter of the appeal of human language to imagination and emotion he is irresistibly attracted by the living charms of Idiom, in truth, so much that he is practically willing to identify the term with this aspect of the phenomenon without expressly saying so. His whole work bears testimony to it. It betrays, in fact, the attitude of an artist, a declaration of love to this ever enchanting and capricious physiognomy of human language.

I am fully aware that these questions ask for a very thorough and systematic handling — all the more so since I side with the nonconformists, believing that what we usually call nowadays the idiomatic aspect is a feature just as basic, essential,

and vital in a language as its physiology, i.e. the study of grammatical structure, or its microscopic anatomy, the minute vocabulary research. The geometrical extent of this contribution is, however, extremely limited, and all I can do here is to outline our problem with one stroke, so to say.

Now, what is our problem? It may be presented with the following somewhat strange questions: Do we know, or do we not know what the linguistic reality commonly called Idiom actually is? Is it a reality, or a mere impression, or fiction? Granted it is a reality, is it an invented reality, constructed by induction in the laboratory of theoretical reasoning, or is it a discovered reality created by life? And finally, if we take the discoverer's part against the inventor, has Idiom been discovered, or is it being discovered?

For my part, I am for the discovery and against the invention. The term Idiom, with the history of its etymology, is merely an incidental by-pass process. If it had not been idiom, it would have been another word. The Spanish, as L. P. Smith remarks, have coined their *modismo*. The word idiom with its etymological metamorphoses and its variable and wavering signification appears to me to be a long groping of human mind for a linguistic reality too obvious to be ignored too long, too inherent in the observer to be observed as object quickly and easily, too complex in all its geographical and historical width and its colloquial as well as literary depth to be completely surveyed, too living and individual in appeal to get hold of it by biopsy, let alone by autopsy. Yes, the reality of Idiom is an idea with which human speech has been pregnant incredibly long, and which is getting born in modern times, when also philology is being more investigated with searchlights of psychological insight.

And now a few words concerning these psychological criteria. I have come to the conclusion that the intelligent layman's attitude is here a more reliable signpost on our way to the culminating point of both our experience and knowledge of the reality of Idiom than the slow and embarrassed approach of the scientific mind. It stands to reason, for Idiom is that which not only exists, but first of all lives in a spoken language. Just listen to the man in the street. He tries to interweave his speech with as many colloquial idioms as he can think of. And it evidently makes him happy. Mostly it is not a pose, an effort to show off originality, to make impression. By finding fitful idioms the speaker feels that both the act of thinking and communicating attains in him the optimum of empirical vitality. The same holds good about an experienced writer. He tries his best to find the most natural and original way of expressing himself and coin his own idioms, betraying to the reader the secrets of his creative imagination and emotionality.

Grammar is indispensable, and the intricacy of its laws arrests the interest of a few. The knowledge of vocabulary is even more indispensable, being the very substance of communication and selfcommunication. And if our vocabulary works well, it is a great advantage and source of satisfaction. But if we succeed in idiomatiz-

ing our utterances to our liking, it is a source of pleasure to us — no matter if we employ with good taste the so-called “clichés”,² or the more individualized and less rigid idioms — for imagination and emotionality participate in stimulating our thinking and speech.

Thus the principal psychological criteria of what we may call the idiomatic effect would be the following:

1. Appeal to imagination.
2. Stirring emotionality (surprise, pleasure, aversion, enchantment, and the like).
3. Economic and concrete, lapidary manner of expression, rather indicating facts with plastic material symbols than conveying them by lengthy abstract explanations. This effect colloquial Idiom has in common with poetry and its diction; yes, we may rightly argue that it introduces the poetic element and freshness into the language of every-day life.

Even the sound effect can participate in the third criterion. When you hear someone saying, “he’s done for”, it sounds like two blows with hammer on the unfortunate’s head. And these blunt blows release a mountain torrent of associations in your imagination and memory.

It is time, however, to enumerate the different interpretations of the term idiom, at least the current ones. Let us consult the O.D. on the matter. In reference to speech it gives three items:

1. “The form of speech peculiar or proper to a people or country; own language or tongue. b) In narrower sense: That variety of a language which is peculiar to a limited district or class of people; dialect.”

Now, this definition puts the words idiom and language practically on a level, because every language or dialect must differ in some respects from its neighbours if it is to be a language; otherwise it would merely be speech. In the mind of a 20th cent. European such a definition — no matter how true historically it may be — appears preposterous and anachronistic, at least from the practical and utilitarian point of view. Each of us lives in the midst of millions of his countrymen speaking the same native tongue, and is used to draw a sharp line between the language as such, on the one hand, and its innumerable idiomatic tendencies, his own personal idiomatic disposition including, on the other hand. Involuntarily you feel tempted to return in your imagination to the veiled semi-mythological past when Abraham took one direction and Lot another, each of them giving rise to another community. which perpetuated and developed their differing individual habits, including the manner of speech or personal idiom. Or at least you feel transferred to the proto-Greek era, when a few hundreds of herdsman and craftsmen formed a tribe that pronounced the same graphic signs somewhat differently, or reproduced in stone the same phones with slightly differing spelling, this effect on your imagination at least being “idiomatic”.

2. "The specific character, property, or genius of any language, the manner of expression which is natural or peculiar to it."

Here we encounter an idea that is at least affiliated with the modern view of the phrase-idiom. It no more means the language as a whole, but only some of its individual features, these features impressing the observer as extraordinary phenomena in some respects, and as typical or characteristic traits of that particular language. One may think here, let us say, of some typical English uses of the present perfect, in which English differs e.g. from French and German respectively; or of the employment of possessive adjectives in situations where their use appears to some foreigners quite pleonastic. "He likes to keep his hands in his pockets." A Czech, for instance, feels like protesting that surely he cannot keep another person's hands in his pockets or his hands in another person's pockets, and is amused by this superfluous stress of ownership. Or being a tributary to his own routine he wonders how the English with their tactful politeness can spell I with a capital and you with a small y in letters; etc., etc. Please, notice the emotional effect produced in the foreigner.

3. "A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc. peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of the language, and often having a signification other than its grammatical and logical one."

This third definition is a magic congruence, transferring us at last to our day. Finally we find ourselves on the enchanted soil of the living linguistic flora that holds even laymen spellbound, making them think and speak of idioms. The third definition is pretty exhaustive, doing philological justice to the modern phenomenon, its only drawback being that it lacks psychological substantiation. The latter we have tried just to hint at and no more. *

Jiří Nosek in his treatise "Anglické idiomy"³ says: "The feature that all discussions of idiomatic phrases have in common is that they deal nearly exclusively with the semantic structure. We do not want to deny the value of such analyses, for the semantic component is a pronounced and for the most part dominating aspect in the sphere of English idiomatic phrases. In the semantic research, however, no consistent methodology has been worked out yet with precisely delimited concepts, this being probably due to the vagueness and insufficient clearness of semantic criteria." The author thereupon presents a very skilful and discriminating analysis of the idiomatic phenomenon from the grammatical point of view, and we find satisfaction in realizing that when wishing to accomplish this meritorious investigation he simply had to resort upon the whole to what we call the Living Idiom, i.e. to idiomatic phraseology.

And now let us inspect once more the Life Guards:

1. "To return" is primarily a personal idea. On such a day friends and relatives call to demonstrate their appreciation and attachment. The day joins them, congratulating as an emissary of the mighty rulers of human destiny, Time, Opportunity,

and Life. — 2. “Long live he” is today an obsolete subjunctive, evoking by associations a more festive mood and atmosphere than its more prosaic equivalent “let him live long.” Thus we may see in it a grammatical idiom, producing with its singularity a similar psychological effect as a phrase does. The threefold use of “to live”, side by side, with different and yet harmonizing semantic tones, combined with the maximum economy of words, inspires an involuntary respect for the experience of what we call humanity. — 3. Induces manly admiration. — 4. An appreciated scholar may be stricken with this malady. What a good thing he is not, and what a pity that some are. — 5. A most sensible person. Just imagine the grotesque sight if his rather short figure had attempted literally anything of the kind. — 6. His fearlessness in such situations makes of him certainly “a jolly good fellow”. — 7 and 8 are too vivid and suggestive to require commentation. — 9 brings us to the verge of the satirical. Splitting a hair longways would be a foolish undertaking if he were guilty of it, but upon the whole he is not, while those who only pretend to be learned in the presence of a learned man cut poor figures indeed, all the poorer if he is modest. — 10—12 give us a vivid visual impression of his physiognomy and character, of his ability to make books and ideas his personal friends as if they were living beings, and of the purity of mind and artlessness of heart mirrored in his face. — 13 and 14 evoke an atmosphere of friendly teasing. 15 and 16 appreciate his aesthetic disposition and his manysided interests, protecting his all-round humanity from the besetting dangers of on-sided learning. — 17 corroborates 6. — 18—19 speak of his life-long friendship with reality and of his disrespect of irresponsible whims of the public opinion. — 20 presupposes his embarrassment blending with curiosity when he is getting acquainted with the contents of this text, and tries to do away with the former by turning his imagination to the amusing idea of a person having a flea in his ear.

Before dismissing the Life Guards we award them the distinction of experts in producing the desired psychological idiomatic effect in the imagination and emotionality of the hearer and in his responsiveness to the peculiar in the style of colloquial diction. And also we are grateful to them for mediating a friendly personal approach.

Summing up all the above-expressed fragmentary views and attitudes we should like to point out what appears to us more than obvious: Practice has been familiar with the reality of idiomatic utterance from times immemorial. Theory is waking up to it and looking for a suitable designation, for a term that could be derived from something that existed before — for this is the traditional way of theory. Now, the term happens to be “idiom” (with all its etymological past). Let it be so! But sure we can settle this dispute by differentiation. We know a tremendous lot about the qualifying function of adjectives and other enlargements. Why not to distinguish, let us say, the Living Idiom from the Historical Idiom or the Terminological Idiom? “Idiomatic phrase” would also do if every psychological idiom were a phrase; some, however, are not.

To be sure, we nonconformists say that the Historical Idiom, i.e. that which is peculiar to a whole nation, tribe, or other class of human society, is not a Living Idiom, because it designates a routine usage of all members of the collective unit, and should thus be tolerated only in the realm of theory and not transgress the frontiers of practice.

No more is, in our opinion, the Technical Idiom a Living Idiom, because it likewise represents a routine usage, and a technical term, even if idiomatic by origin, is today no more than a dry designation of some technical phenomenon. It is nearly the same story as that of surnames, some of which are almost provokingly idiomatic by origin, and yet we see in them today just designations of personal identity, refusing as improper any grotesque associations should they occasionally occur to us.

NOTES

¹ The set is most frequently represented in dictionaries by the adjective *idios*, and the principal meanings implied in quotations are: one's own, proper, personal, individual, private, particular, singular, differing.

² See: *Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Clichés*, London 1947.

³ *Jiří Nosek, Anglické idiomy (English Idioms)*, Notes on their grammatical structure, ČMF 38, 2–3 (1956).

IDIOM — NÁSTROJ OSOBNÍHO SBLIŽOVÁNÍ

(Je řecké *ἰδιωμα* zákonitým zploditelem moderního anglického idiomu?)

Je podán stručný nástin semantického a etymologického vývoje slova „idiom“, které přešlo z řečtiny do latiny, franštiny a v moderní době také do angličtiny, v níž se funkce idiomu stala při silné individualizační dikční tendenci mimořádně výrazným jazykovým činitelem.

Je poukázáno na rozmanitost v chápání a definování idiomu. Ještě dnes se uvádí na prvním místě anachronistický tradiční a konzervativní výklad, pokládající idiom za souhrn všech charakteristik — předem ovšem ve výrazivu — jimiž se příslušný jazyk liší od jazyků ostatních. —

Článek se zabývá rozporem mezi rozpačitým stanoviskem terminologickým a mezi stále aktuálnější a prohlubující se skutečností a zkušeností těch jazykových jevů, kterým dnešní znalec i uživatel živé řeči přisuzuje „idiomaticnost“. Vyslovuje se názor, že i když potřeba mluvit i psát idiomaticky provázela člověka už od kolébky jazykové kultury, je to teprve doba dnešní, která začíná plně chápat rozsah i dosah idiomatické mluvy.

V práci se obhajuje stanovisko, že pro řešení tohoto nově rozrůstajícího problému bude psychologická základna patrně stejně důležitá jako výlučně filologická, ne-li dokonce směrodatnější. Psychologickým aspektem idiomu se mní jeho pronikavý účín na imaginaci a emoci jak samého sdělujícího, tak ovšem i příjemce sdělení.

Výklad je provázen stručným psychologicko-semantickým rozбором vybraných idiomů, kterých lze výhodně a účinně použít při aktu osobního blahopřání a tím se vlastně stať sama stává poněkud neobvyklou formou blahopřejného projevu.

Zároveň je pokusem dokázat, že řešení intelektuální otázky lze oblékat do dikčního roucha idiomatického, aniž je to v neprospěch věci, což je stanovisko, k němuž má celkem vzato Angličan blíže nežli Čech.