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## **IDIOMS INSIDE OUT: MONEY IN ENGLISH IDIOMS**

The present article is a study of the nature of idiomatic phrases. It analyses idioms relating to money and looks into some unclear aspects of idiomatic expressions in general. The article draws on data presented in my MA thesis, for the purpose of which I extracted 260 idioms from the following dictionaries: *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*, *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms*, *Longman American Idioms Dictionary*, *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of English Idioms*, *Chambers English Dictionary of Idioms*. The analysis of the idiomatic expressions was carried out with respect to such important aspects as structure, meaning, variation, origin and usage, etc. Below are comments on interesting findings or problematic issues which I encountered in the course of writing the dissertation.

### **Characteristic features of idioms**

Most linguistic works and encyclopaedias highlight the following features of idioms (Kvetko 1999: 14–15):

- lexical complexity and semantic simplicity (Cruse qtd. in Kvetko 1999: 15) – the meaning of an idiom is not derivable from the meanings of its individual parts
- fixed form or invariability – the number of paradigmatic variants (if there are any) is limited
- figurativeness

These features can be illustrated with the example of the following joke (Tkachuk 2004: 68):

#### Beware of the Taxmen!

A hare is hopping through the woods and all of a sudden he is overtaken by a snail. The hare is shocked to see a snail moving so fast and asks in astonishment: “Where are you hurrying off to?” The snail replies: “Why, don’t you know? The taxmen have come to the woods and they are going to collect taxes. Imagine that! I’ve got a house, my wife has got a house and our son has got a house as well. It’ll cost us a pretty penny!”

As soon as the hare hears this, he runs away at the double. Before long, he bumps into a swallow. The swallow asks him: “Hey, where are you hurrying off to?”

The hare says: “Well, the snail said that the taxmen have come to the woods. They are going to collect taxes. Imagine that! All my life I’ve been working hard to keep the wolf from the door, my wife has worked hard to keep the wolf from the door and our two sons have been working hard to keep the wolf from the door. It’ll cost us a pretty penny!”

When the swallow hears this news, he gathers his family and they head south as fast as their wings can carry them. While they are flying over the Zoo, a monkey spots them and shouts: “Hey over there, where are you flying to in such a hurry?”

The bird replies: “Well, the taxmen have come to the woods and they are going to collect taxes. Imagine that! I’ve been feathering my own nest all my life, my wife has been feathering her own nest and our daughter has been feathering her own nest. It’ll cost us a pretty penny!”

The monkey replies: “Take it easy, man! I’ve been bare arsed my whole life and they still put me behind bars!”

The humorous effect of the joke depends on the combination of idiomatic and non-idiomatic readings of the idioms *keep the wolf from the door* and *feather your own nest*. These two idiomatic expressions fulfill all the above-mentioned criteria. But there are many idioms which would not meet all the requirements. Or, they would not be able to satisfy them fully. Such marginal cases are dealt with in individual sub-sections.

### **Idioms versus collocations**

According to Biber et al., the key terms for differentiating idioms from collocations are “idiomaticity and stability” (988). Unlike idioms, collocations are “statistical associations” (Biber et al. 2000: 988). The constituents of collocations retain their original meaning, while the constituents of idioms acquire a new meaning as a whole. The two criteria suffice for the majority of idioms. It is much more difficult to deal with marginal cases. For example, *pocket money* is obviously a collocation and *funny money* or *pin money* are idioms. But the position of *blood money* or *easy money* is not so clear. They can be moved to either of the two categories. In my dissertation, such idioms were dealt with as motivated idioms.

### **(Questioning) Lexical complexity**

The above-mentioned criterion of lexical complexity takes it for granted that an idiom consists of at least two words. In his *Introduction to A Dictionary of American Idioms*, Makkai allows for one-word idioms (vii). For example, *peanuts* as in *work for/get (paid) peanuts* or *a packet* as in *cost/charge/make/earn a packet* are one-word idioms. In the given examples, the verbs retain their original meaning. It is the nouns (*peanuts*, *a packet*) which acquire a figurative sense if combined with suitable verbs. It can be argued that Makkai’s approach does not contradict the traditional conception of idioms since one-word idioms are used with a relatively limited number of semantically restricted word groups.

**(Questioning) Invariability**

The criterion of fixed form gives the impression that idioms are not flexible, but it is true only to a certain extent – idioms do have variants. The following list of possible variants of idioms is adapted from Kvetko (34):

- syntagmatic variants – *feather your nest, feather your own nest*
- paradigmatic or lexical variants – *a pot of gold, a crock of gold*
- grammatical variants – *be well off, be better off, be the best off*
- spelling variants – *on a shoe string, on a shoestring*
- geographical variants – *(pay cash/money) on the barrel/barrelhead in American English, (pay cash/money) on the nail in British English*

The view that idioms are not invariable is also supported by the examples of idiomatic derivation and conversion (see below).

**Idiomatic classes**

Classifying idioms according to idiomatic classes is a way of dealing with their miscellaneousness. Idiomatic classes also allow for systematic analysis of idiomatic derivation. In compliance with Kvetko (37), idioms can be divided into sentential and non-sentential (sayings and proverbs). The latter ones can be further divided into verbal idioms (*live in clover*) and verbless idioms, which are mainly nominal (*a cash cow*), adjectival (*rich as Croesus*) and adverbial (*on a shoestring*). Nominal idioms, for instance, contain a noun and function as nouns (subjects, objects, and complements) in a sentence. The term “verbal idiom” is slightly misleading. Only such idioms as *pinch and scrape* can be regarded as purely verbal, and they are not very frequent. The majority of so-called verbal idioms comprise a predicate and an object. Table 1 below indicates the frequency of different idiomatic classes in the analysed material:

**Table 1** Idiomatic Classes

<b>Idiomatic classes</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>
verbal	180
nominal	36
sentential	22
adverbial	15
adjectival	7
<b>total</b>	<b>260</b>

Verbal idioms are the most frequent ones. But it has to be taken into consideration that there are many nominal, adjectival and adverbial idioms derived from the verbal ones. These idioms were not included in the statistical table.

Idiomatic phrases tend to adapt to the needs of the language and become flexible in terms of their word class. The examples of idiomatic derivation are numerous (*bread and butter* – nominal, *bread-and-butter* – adjectival; *get on the gravy train* – verbal, *the gravy train* – nominal; *pinch pennies* – verbal, *penny pinching* – nominal or adjectival; *wipe the slate clean* – verbal, *a clean slate* – nominal; *a fool and his money are soon parted* – sentential, *part a fool from his money* – verbal). Cases of conversion are not so frequent (*penny pinching* – nominal or adjectival).

### Inner structure of idiomatic classes

Table 2 enumerates the most frequent structural patterns within the above-mentioned idiomatic classes. The structures were adapted from Kvetko's handbook (37–43). The table reflects major productive idiomatic structures of idioms relating to money.

**Table 2** Structural Patterns of Idiomatic Classes

Structures within idiomatic classes	Examples of idioms	Number of occurrences
verbal idioms (total)		180
V+(Adj)+N+(N)	<i>foot the bill</i>	55
V+N+Prep+(N)	<i>be quits in</i>	32
V+Prep+(Adj/sb's) + N+(...)	<i>live in clover</i>	31
V+(sb/sth)+Adj/Prep+N	<i>strike it rich</i>	9
V+sb's/N's+N	<i>earn your daily bread</i>	9
other types		44
nominal idioms (total)		36
Adj+N	<i>a small fortune</i>	13
N+N	<i>a cash cow</i>	9
(Adj)+N+Prep+N	<i>money for jam</i>	7
other types		7
sentential idioms (total)		22
simple sentence	<i>Every cloud has a silver lining</i>	13
nonverbal	<i>In for a penny, in for a pound</i>	5
other types		4
adverbial idioms (total)		15
Prep+Adv/N	<i>on the never-never</i>	10
other types		5
adjectival idioms (total)		7
(as)+Adj+as+N+(...)	<i>as rich as Croesus</i>	6
other types		1

### Peculiarities in idiomatic expressions

Being emphatic and vivid expressions, idioms do not necessarily follow the logic of language economy. For the sake of emphasis, idioms sometimes contain “un-

necessary” words; for instance, two nearly synonymous words (*pinch and scrape*) or two alternatives (*not for love or money*). The connector *and* plays an important role in such cases (*keep body and soul together; your bread and butter*). Other means of expressing vividness and playfulness are alliteration (*rob Peter to pay Paul; your bread and butter; as good as gold*), assonance (*from rags to riches*) and parallel rhythmical structures (*in for a penny, in for a pound; take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves; penny plain, twopence coloured*). The pronoun *it* has a special function in idioms. It is used as an indefinite object “to represent a kind of cognate accusative” (McMordie 1964: 49). If there is a choice between the pronoun and a noun (*be rolling in money or be rolling in it*), the variant with the pronoun is more frequent.

Idioms seem to be tolerant of structures which would be otherwise considered ungrammatical. For example, in idiomatic phrases one can find instances of peculiar grammar usage (*you pays your money and you takes your chances/choice*) or unusual morphological conversion (*the haves and the have-nots*). There are many instances of words which are not used nowadays because the objects they denote have ceased to exist, and it is only in idioms that these words still occur (purse with strings in *tighten/loosen/control/hold the purse strings*; slate in *wipe the slate clean or on the slate*; shilling in *cut someone off without a shilling or make an honest shilling*). Common practices from the past also appear in idiomatic expressions (the practice of paying workers in salt instead of wages is illustrated in the idiom *be worth your salt*). Even obsolete words have a chance of surviving in idiomatic expressions (*thar* in the idiom *there is gold in them there/thar something*). All of these unusual characteristics prove that despite being tightly connected with the language, idiomatic expressions tend to have their own peculiarities.

### Relations between idioms

Relations between idioms can be compared to relations between words. Idioms can have synonyms, antonyms and homonyms. In addition, it is possible to combine them according to semantic or lexical criteria into idiomatic semantic fields or, respectively, idiomatic families.

Homonymous relations between idioms are much less common than those between words. There are only 18 occurrences out of 260 idioms in the analysed material. Homonymous idiomatic expressions (*hit the roof/ceiling* is used to describe a situation when prices increase suddenly and rapidly or when a person becomes angry and starts shouting at someone) have different meanings and distinctive figurativeness and motivation (Kvetko 1999: 46). Antonymous relations seem to occur more frequently. They are based on the contrasting figurativeness and motivation (e.g. *have (got) money to burn and not have (got) two pennies/cents to rub together*). Therefore idioms with pure negation (e.g. *be in the red – be out of the red; have (got) money to burn – not have (got) money to burn*) are considered as merely negative forms, not real antonyms (Kvetko 1999: 49). Simi-

larly, synonyms are based on different figurative meanings, e.g. *bleed someone dry/white* and *take someone to the cleaners*. Paradigmatic and syntagmatic variants are merely variants of the same idiom. Idiomatic semantic fields combine idioms with similar semantic features. For example, in the idiomatic semantic field “Be Wealthy and Wealth” one can find such idioms as *be/live in clover*, *live like a king*, *live in the lap of luxury*, *be in the money*, *be made of money*, *be born with a silver spoon in your mouth*, *a king’s ransom*, *a small fortune* or *as rich as Croesus*. In the idiomatic family “Money”, one can find idioms containing the noun *money*, but they are not necessarily related semantically to the topic of money matters (*be right on the money*, *the man/smb/sth for your money*, *not for love or/nor money*, *for my money*, *be in the money*, *be made of money*).

### (Questioning) Figurativeness

Not all idioms are equally figurative. As Kvetko sums up (43–44), idiomatic phrases can be divided into phraseological fusions (absolutely non-motivated idioms, at least from the perspective of modern English – *a white elephant*), phraseological unities (partially-motivated idioms – *live in clover*) and phraseological combinations (motivated idioms – *easy money*). The borderlines are difficult and perhaps not necessary to state.

Motivated idioms have a greater potential to express the semantics of idioms through the semantics of individual words. Such tendencies in phraseological combinations and, perhaps, phraseological fusions are much weaker, but possible. Below are examples of several idiomatic semantic fields and idioms they include. The idioms are listed according to their keywords (nouns, adjectives, adverbs and proper nouns):

### Idiomatic Semantic Fields

Be Wealthy:

- nouns: *clover* (*live in clover*), *hog* (*live high off/on the hog*), *king* (*live like a king*, *king’s ransom*), *lord* (*live like a lord*), *money* (*be in the money*, *be made of money*, *have money to burn*), *velvet* (*be on velvet*), *gold* (*a pot of gold*), *fortune* (*a small fortune*)
- proper nouns: *Riley/Reilly* (*lead a life of Riley/Reilly*), *Croesus* (*rich as Croesus*)
- adjectives: *rich* (*rich as Croesus*), *silver* (*be born with a silver spoon in your mouth*), *high* (*the high life*), *pretty* (*a pretty penny*), *easy* (*an easy street*)
- adverbs: *comfortably* (*be comfortably off*), *well* (*be well off*)

Be Poor:

- nouns: *bean* (*not have a bean*), *cent* (*not have a red cent*), *pennies* (*not have two pennies to rub together*)

- proper nouns: *Lazarus* (*poor as Lazarus*)
- adjectives: *hard* (*be hard up, live on hard tack*), *queer* (*live in Queer Street*), *poor* (*poor as church mouse*)
- adverbs: *badly* (*be badly off*)

#### Earn Money:

- nouns: *bacon* (*bring home the bacon*), *bread* (*earn your daily bread*), *crust* (*make your crust*), *salt* (*be worth your salt*), *butter* (*your bread and butter*), *wolf* (*keep the wolf from the door*), *meal* (*a meal ticket*)
- adjectives: *daily* (*earn your daily bread*), *honest* (*make an honest penny*)

Idioms from idiomatic families are arranged from the opposite direction, i.e. proceeding from keywords to their meanings. The listing contains the major idiomatic families only:

### Idiomatic Families

#### Money:

- be right (*be right on the money*)
- the most suitable (*the man/smb/sth for your money*)
- opinion (*for my money*)

#### Penny:

- be unwanted (*put your two penn'orth in, turn up like a bad penny*)

#### Dollar:

- be certain (*dollars to doughnuts, bet your bottom dollar*)
- good – appearance or health (*look a million dollars, feel like a million dollars*)
- be important (*the 64,000 dollar question*)

#### Gold:

- be valuable – financially or morally (*be like gold dust, have a heart of gold, be worth your weight in gold, good as gold*)

The list of idioms from idiomatic semantic fields proves that prosperity is associated with soft material, meat, comfort and aristocracy, while poverty is associated with small amounts of money and hardness. The connection of money and food stands out in the category “Earn Money”. The list of idioms from idiomatic families confirms that larger monetary units refer to something important, positive and suitable, whereas *a penny* as a smaller monetary unit has negative connotations.

### Origins and stylistics

Idioms are often mistakenly considered to be primarily informal expressions (*Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*, viii). The occurrence of informal idioms in my survey is relatively high, but they are not in the majority. Since idioms are inclined to informal usage, one can find such words as *ha'porth* or *penn'orth* in the idioms *spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar* or *put your two penn'orth in*, which reflect pronunciation of *halfpenny's worth* or *pennies worth*. Table 3 presents the ratios of different stylistic features:

**Table 3** Stylistic Features

Stylistic features	Number of occurrences
neutral	116
informal	86
old-fashioned	22
journalisms	3
humorous	2
euphemisms	2
literary	1
<b>total</b>	<b>260</b>

Stylistic features of idiomatic expressions are tightly interconnected with their origins. For instance, idioms of Biblical origin are more frequent in written language, while those originating from slang expressions or gambling usually belong to informal speech. Information on the origins was extracted from the five above-mentioned dictionaries as well as Whitehead's *Everyday English Phrases* and McMordie's *English Idioms and How to Use Them*. Table 4 indicates the origins of a sample of 91 idioms in the material analysed:

**Table 4** Origins

Origins	Example of idioms	Number of occurrences
past practices	<i>wipe the slate clean</i>	24
gambling	<i>break the bank</i>	8
literature	<i>your pound of flesh</i>	7
sailors	<i>be/live on hard tack</i>	7
Bible	<i>live off/on the fat of the land</i>	5
slang	<i>be counting the beans</i>	5
animals	<i>draw/pull in your horns</i>	5
historical figures	<i>(as) rich as Croesus</i>	4
songs, shows	<i>the 64,000 question</i>	3
other	<i>be on velvet</i>	23
<b>total</b>		<b>91</b>

### Usage in the mass media

From the very beginning of their existence, idioms have borne a considerable creative potential, which is frequently used especially in the mass media. Below are several examples of such creative adaptations:

- *money for old rope* – “Money for old mice” (Pilcher 2002)
- *put your money where your mouth is* – “Put your money where your spouse is” (Ferrebee 1997)
- *bite the hand that feeds you* – “Democrats insisted that Gore’s willingness to bite the hand that writes the big checks proves his independence” (Tumulty 2000)
- *money doesn’t grow on trees* – “Valuable sales skills don’t grow on trees” (Bradbury 2003)

### Conclusion

Being an inseparable part of the language, idioms have a special position within it. Idiomatic expressions do follow grammatical, syntactical and morphological rules. However, they can occasionally deviate from these rules. Idioms also exploit the possibilities of the language allowing for the processes of derivation and conversion. The latter feature is closely connected with the flexibility of idiomatic expressions. Idioms cover different registers and include a stylistically wide range of vocabulary. Originating from a variety of sources, they greatly enrich the language. There is a tendency towards creativity in idiomatic expressions. This is evident in the usage of alliteration, parallel rhythmical patterns and rhyme. As playful expressions in themselves, idioms have tremendous potential for creative adaptation. In many instances, idioms can be compared to words, which also enter into synonymous, antonymous, and homonymous relations, and can be combined into semantic fields and families. Hence in general, idiomatic expressions are very versatile. This is the main reason for numerous difficulties with defining precise boundaries of idioms. Yet it is also what makes them so engaging.

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