



## PROBLEMS OF OLD-FASHIONED IDIOMS AND PHRASES FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS IN MODERN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT:

This article is devoted to the problems of the use of old-fashioned idiomatic jhu have been detected and the solutions to these phenomena have been proposed.

**Аннотация:** Данная статья посвящена проблемам использования устаревших идиоматических фраз лицами, не являющимся носителями языка. В ходе исследования было выявлено несколько проблем, и были предложены их решения.

**Keywords:** *Realities, old fashioned idioms, lexical units, lexicon, language carriers, language entities, exposure, entries.*

Languages are constant realities undergoing various alterations through the centuries. As cultures, customs, surroundings, way of life, political system of a certain nation changes over years, the language which is considered to be an integral part of a nation tends to alter along with these shifts. Naturally, there are other external factors that play a decisive role in the transformation of a language and the mixture of two or more cultures is a good example of this. Grammatical and lexical units of a host language are bound to change in the process of this blend of cultures. Some elements are integrated, yet others are lost due to the convenience or dominance of an alien language. Prominent linguist at Sydney University N. Enfieldonce said that words, like fashions, come in and out. Indeed, he was somehow right while drawing parallels between the two, at first glance not even closely related, domains: fashion and linguistics.

“It is apparent that some lexical units become old fashioned, while others appear in the lexicon of language carriers.”<sup>1</sup> Old fashioned or so called obsolete language entities pose less of a challenge for native speakers. They intuitively know what words are outdated and what are not. This happens because they have numerous years of experience to reflect on. Starting from the birth they are constantly exposed to their native language: they listen to the

<sup>1</sup>Fowler H.W. A dictionary of modern English usage. Oxford at the Clarendon Press . London: Humphrey Milford. 1926.

people around, watch TV, read books, write reports, communicate with people who use the same language. In other words, they incessantly accumulate information (often unconsciously) about their language, the way that words go together (collocations), frequency of language units, different connotations that words might have and various other aspects of language usage. It is especially true in terms of idioms and phrases. Roberto de Caro confirmed that they are relatively hard to learn due to their semantic and cultural features<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, D.P Auseber states that it takes years and multiple exposures in different contexts, even for a native speaker, to be able to use them confidently in everyday speech. Native speakers who rely on their extensive experience with the language can easily spot outdated idioms and phrases and avoid them in a daily speech so as not to sound old-fashioned. However, what about non-native speakers of the English language who do not have enough exposure to distinguish these fine nuances of the lexis mentioned above? Clearly, it is not easy for them to differentiate between old-fashioned and contemporary idioms and phrases. This article explores some of the issues connected with the use of outdated English idioms and phrases, the causes of this phenomenon and propose some solutions.

The needs for the acquisition of less common lexis often referred to as idioms and phrases are varied. Firstly, they are ubiquitous in all languages across the world and ignoring them is tantamount to missing out on a large proportion of the phrasal interpretations and language nuances. Idioms and phrases make your mind do a shift from reality to hypothetical thoughts or concepts they refer to. They give a speaker a chance to express their thoughts precisely and creatively providing an outlet for communication and thereby enabling them to talk about the same things but with different shades of meaning. By comparing the following excerpts with idioms, phrases and non-idiomatic alternatives one can identify advantages and peculiarities of idiomatic language: “We need to **mobilize** so we can establish a **launch date**. We have got all the **bases covered**, our **target is locked** and I think we have a good chance to **capture the market** before it **retreats**.” The very excerpt can cause some difficulties to a non-native speaker because of the usage of idioms and uncommon language but for a native English speaker it sounds natural and, moreover, makes more sense as it conveys the message precisely with the aid of idioms and phrases. The same text replaced with non-idiomatic alternatives: “We need to get ready to move so we can establish a time to begin moving. We have got all the issues resolved, our goal is in sight and I think we have a good chance to grab the market before it goes away”. This alternative version of the text poses less of a challenge

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<sup>2</sup>Roberto de Caro, Eliana Edith. The advantages and importance of learning and using Idioms in English. Cuadernos de Linguística Hispanica. 2009

for non-native speakers since all idiomatic expressions are changed to more general words that are understandable to an average language user. Although easy to understand, the latter alternative has lost its initial expressiveness and precision for the reader. Therefore, it can be argued that the idioms and phrases add extra “colour” and “spice” to the text or speech.

There are a number of problems associated with the usage and translation of idiomatic expressions for language learners. In general, most idioms are culturally bound and represent the traditions, customs, religion and lifestyle of the speaker. That is why, it is often difficult, if not possible, to find an alternative phrase in the second language (L2). As Mona Baker claims: “An idiom or fixed expression may have no equivalent in the target language”.<sup>3</sup> She also argues that different languages see the world differently. This means that whereas a language may convey a specific meaning using a single word, another language may express it by the use of different linguistic means such as an idiom or a fixed idiom, an explanatory sentence and vice versa. However, problem occurs when a language learner who knows idioms and fixed expressions in their own language wants to use the same idiomatic expressions in the target language i.e. English. To illustrate, Uzbek expression “*yomg`ir chelaklab yog`ayapti*” has several alternatives in the English language and a speaker aiming to make his or her speech in English more expressive wants to use an idiomatic expression. An authoritative dictionary of the English language, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, offers us a number of options:

- 1) It is pouring with rain (**expression**)
- 2) pouring rain(**collocation**)
- 3) torrential rain(**collocation**)
- 4) driving rain(**collocation**) (Excerpt 1)
- 5) (be) raining cats and dogs(**idiom**)(Excerpt 2)<sup>4</sup>

Excerpt 1: from OALD 8

noun

1. uncountable, singular water that falls from the sky in separate drops

- There will be rain in all parts tomorrow.
- Rain is forecast for the weekend.
- Don’t go out **in the rain**.
- It’s **pouring with rain** (= raining very hard).

**heavy/torrential/driving rain**

- The rain poured down.
- **It looks like rain** (= as if it is going to rain).

Excerpt 2: from OALD 8

**(be) raining cats and dogs**

**Be raining cats and dogs**idiom

informal to be raining heavily

<sup>3</sup>Baker.M. In other words: A course book on translation. London and New York. Routledge. 1992

<sup>4</sup>Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. Oxford University Press. 1995.

Main entry: **rain**idiom

All options are correct and can be used to closely express the original idiom. However, the 5<sup>th</sup> option might cause a problem when used by a speaker to describe a heavy rain. “Most learners of English will be familiar with the idiom “it is raining cats and dogs”. Indeed, majority of people remember it because it is such an unusual expression and one which can conjure up quite entertaining images. There is, however, one small problem with this idiom: native speakers of English rarely use it and if they do, it sounds rather old fashioned”.<sup>5</sup>

If we refer to other renowned dictionaries such as CALD (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary) and LDOCE (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English) in the entries of the word “rain” the idiom “rain cats and dogs” is given with extra comments:

Excerpt 3: from CALD 4

**it’s raining cats and dogs!**

**it’s raining cats and dogs!**OLD-FASHIONED

- something that you say when it is raining heavily

Excerpt 4: from LDOCE 5

- **phrases**
- **it is raining cats and dogs***informal* (= it is raining very hard – this phrase sounds rather old-fashioned)

It is obvious that these dictionaries show that the idiom is rather old fashioned, while this is not the case with the former dictionary. Even if there is a note about the usage of the word some learners tend not to look at it. So, when consulting a dictionary in order to determine whether the idiom is old or not, it would be sensible to use more than one dictionary and read extra information given to the idiom. Thus majority of problems could be avoided.

Another problem that causes non-natives to use dated idiomatic phrases is their ubiquity in some course books aimed at teaching the English language. In their article on course books P. Thomas and R. Schmidt write: “Course books are designed to assist learners and teaching process, but the value of a course book depends on how intelligently it is used”.<sup>6</sup> Although course books are indispensable part of a classroom, they are sometimes not updated or checked for compatibility with the time, especially those that are published in non-English speaking countries.

In essence there are two distinct issues:

- 1) the use of books which were printed decades ago;
- 2) reluctance to check whether the word has fallen into disuse

The first issue is prevalent in a number of countries, as publishing houses tend to publish those books that no longer require author’s consent. Thus, some outdated idiomatic phrases

<sup>5</sup>Tim Bowen. [https://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/vocabulary/macmillan-dictionary-resources/your-english/idioms/your-english-idioms-raining-cats-and-dogs/156053.article./](https://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/vocabulary/macmillan-dictionary-resources/your-english/idioms/your-english-idioms-raining-cats-and-dogs/156053.article/)

<sup>6</sup>Thomas P.L and Schmidt.R. Challenging textbooks: Servants not masters of our classroom. The English Journal,100(3). 91-96.

easily find their way into modern world eventually being used by non-natives in their speech. A book titled “English for kids” by V.Skulte is an example of this. Despite the fact that this book has been updated multiple times to reflect the modern English, book markets still laden with old versions of this book. To address the problem, a teacher should consider newly published books by authoritative publishers while designing a course since they closely reflect the changes of the modern world and constantly checked for old items.

The second issue is less serious, but requires close examination. Authors of some new course books (mainly in countries where English is studied as a foreign language) sometimes fail to check the usage of a language unit. Establishing special institutions that supervise the content of the book or organizing feedback sessions before publishing English language course books would benefit both authors and learners.

Ultimately, language is not a stagnant unit, it flows and experiences multitude transformations. New words are added into the lexicon and some words fall into disuse and idioms and phrases are not exception to this as they also undergo this process. However, as it has been argued above, this process may cause some difficulties and obstacles for non-native speakers of the English language. In our view these difficulties are mainly connected with:

- 1) the improper use of learner’s dictionaries
- 2) presence of old fashioned idiomatic expressions in some course books
- 3) both educators and authors’ lack of attention to the dated units.

These issues can be redressed in several ways but requires collaborative efforts of all parties involved.

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