

A Pragmatic Analysis of Some Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract

The present study seeks to analyze some idiomatic expressions from a pragmatic point of view. The study, in fact, postulates that behind each idiomatic expression there lies an intended meaning, i.e., the metaphorical meaning other than the literal meaning of this idiomatic expression. The study also hypothesizes that the idiomatic expression can keep its idiomaticity (metaphorization) through flouting the three maxims: quality, manner, and relevance. This means that the idiomatic expressions do not convey the truth, familiarity and the literal meaning of their words; rather there is an implicit meaning which can be captured through flouting Grice's maxims.

تحليل تداولي لبعض التعابير الاصطلاحية (الخلاصة)

تسعى الدراسة الحالية إلى تحليل التعابير الاصطلاحية تداولياً حيث تفترض الدراسة بأن كل تعبير اصطلاحى يحمل في ثناياه معنى مقصوداً أي معنى مجازياً غير المعنى الحرفي المعهود. كما تفترض الدراسة بأن التعبير الاصطلاحى يمكن أن يحافظ على اصطلاحيته (المجازية) من خلال خرق المحاور الثلاث النوع والحال والعلاقة. وهذا يعني إن التعابير الاصطلاحية لا تنقل الحقيقة والمألوفية والمعنى الحرفي بل تحمل في طياتها معنى ضمناً والذي يمكن استقصاءه من خلال خرق محاور غرايس.

Introduction

The problem of the idiomatic expressions is usually special to one language and cannot be translated word for word. In other words, to decipher the intended meaning of the idiomatic expression, it is necessary to resort to the metaphorical meaning rather than the literal meaning. However, Swan (1995:234) ensures that "Informal spoken language is often very idiomatic". In this frame-work, one is tempted to capture the intended meaning of the idiomatic expression which lies beyond the literal meaning of that idiomatic expression. Since pragmatics is mainly concerned with the intended meaning of any utterance, it is plausible to grasp the intended meaning of the idiomatic expressions throughout investigating the flouting which occurs in Grice's maxims: quantity, quality, manner and relevance. In fact, the study supposes that flouting Grice's maxims makes the idiomatic expression keep its idiomaticity. Therefore from a pragmatic point of view, the idiomatic expression is based on the flouting of Grice's maxims. This proves that unless the flouting of the maxims occurs, the

idiomatic expression will no longer be an idiom instead it will just be a constraint of words and each one has its own literal meaning.

1- Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a term which is traditionally used to label one of the major divisions including semiotics, semantics, and syntax. In modern linguistics, pragmatics has come to be applied to the study of language from the point of view of the users-especially of the choices they make , the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction , and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication . In fact, the field of pragmatics focuses on an area between semantics, sociolinguistics and extralinguistic context, but the boundaries with these other domains are incapable of giving a precise definition. At present, no coherent pragmatic theory has been achieved due to the variety of topics it has to account for including aspects of deixis, conversational implicatures, presuppositions, speech acts and discourse structure (Crystal, 2003: 364).

As a result to a consequence of the potentially vast scope of the subject, several conflicting definitions have arisen. Thus, Adams (1985:1) states that pragmatics "is concerned with the principles of language use, in which the speaker and the hearer are major categories that determine linguistic interpretation." Similarly, Roach (2002:61) relates pragmatics to the language use by stating that pragmatics is a "field of study that concerns itself with the social,communicative and practical use of language ,and has become recognized as a vital part of linguistics".He (Ibid) further adds that work in this field looks at such things as the presuppositions and background knowledge that language users need to have in order to communicate, the strategies they adopt in order to make a point more convincing and the kinds of function that language is used for .Per contra, Levinson (1983:9) goes further to say that pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized,or encoded in the structure of a language.One could say that pragmatics is the study of just those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars. In fact, such a definition restricts pragmatics to the study of certain aspects of linguistic structure.On the other hand,Aitchison (1987:97) states that pragmatics is the branch of linguistics which studies those aspects of meaning which cannot be captured by a semantic theory. In other words, pragmatics deals with how speakers use language in ways which cannot be predicted from the linguistic knowledge alone. In a narrow sense, it deals with how listeners arrive at the intended meaning of speakers. In its broadest sense, it deals with the general principles followed by human beings when they communicate with one another.Finch (2000:150) points out that pragmatics focuses on what is not explicitly stated and on how one interprets utterances in situational contexts.This,in fact, proves that Finch agrees with the opinion of Aitchison in the view that pragmatics is mainly concerned with capturing the intended meaning of the speaker.

1.1- Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory was developed in 1960s by a group of British language philosophers such as J.L.Austin. However, speech act theory treats an utterance as an act performed by a speaker in a context with respect to an addressee (Traugott and Pratt, 1980:229).

They (Ibid) add that performing a speech act involves performing (1) a locutionary act which is the act of producing a recognizable grammatical utterance in the language. And (2) illocutionary act which means the attempt to accomplish some communicative purposes including warning, promising greeting, reminding... etc. (3) Perlocutionary act which means the bringing about the effects to the hearers. In other words, one should look at the particular effect the speaker's utterance has on the listener who may feel amused, persuaded, warned...etc. (Ibid.)

In terms of actions, Yule (1996:100) states that the term 'speech act' covers 'actions' such as requesting, commanding, questioning, and informing. Typically, it is the case that one uses the following linguistic forms with the following functions:

Forms Functions

- (1) Did you eat the food? Question
- (2) Eat the food (please). Command (request)
- (3) You ate the food. Statement

When a form such as Did he...? Are they...? or Can you...? is used to ask a question, it is described as a direct speech act. For example, when a speaker does not know something and asks the hearer to inform him, he will typically produce a direct speech of the following type: (4) Can you ride a bicycle? Now compare the above utterance with this utterance (5) Can you pass the salt? In the second example 'can you pass the salt?' one would not usually understand the utterance as a question about one's ability to do something. In fact, one would not treat this as a question at all. Hence, one would treat it as a request and perform the action requested. Such an example is described as an indirect speech act. Therefore, whenever one of the forms in the above set is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it, the result is an indirect speech act. The following utterance has the form which is normally associated with a statement: (6) You left the door open. If someone says this sentence to a person who has just come into the speaker's room, probably the hearer would understand this statement as a request to close the door instead of understanding it as a statement (Ibid:100-101).

2- Relevance Theory

Pragmatics needs only one principle which is relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986:162). This principle, in fact, assumes that every utterance creates in the addressee an expectation of relevance. The underlying assumption of relevance theory assumes that, in any given context, one has to assume that what people say is relevant – making sense of a further specification of the Gricean notion of cooperation. The principle of relevance is much more explicit than Grice's cooperative principle and maxims. In other words, Sperber and Wilson (Ibid) feel

that the cooperative principle, when taken too literally, puts too much of a strain on one's linguistic interaction. On the other hand, Sperber and Wilson (Ibid) postulate the importance of the relevance principle to the communicators when they mention that

“ communicators do not follow the principle of relevance; and they could not violate it even if they wanted. The principle of relevance applies without exceptions... ”,

Grundy (2000:111) goes further to say that the relevance theory is able to account for the understanding failures which occur when the processing load is too great for relevance assumptions to

be covered or when the addressee lacks sufficient contextual resources to infer the explicatures and implicatures which prove the relevance of the utterance. Relevance theory is to be preferred over other accounts of utterance understanding to the extent that it recognizes and can account for the fact that not all utterances are successfully understood, and that a particular utterance may be understood in different ways and to different degrees by different hearers (Ibid.).

2.1- Implicature

The study of implicatures is fairly well developed and it forms the cornerstone of most pragmatic approaches. The linguist whose name is principally associated with implicatures is the philosopher H.P. Grice. He argues that in order, for communication to take place in natural language, speakers enter into an unspoken agreement over ways of interpreting what is said (Finch, 2000:149). Kearns (2000:254) goes on to say that Gricean implicature is a systematic part of communication which involves the interplay between what a speaker actually said and certain broad rules, shared by speakers and hearers which govern communication. On the other hand, Mey (1993:99) traces back the etymology of the word 'implicature' in stating that :

Etymologically; 'to imply' means

to fold something into something else

(from the Latin verb *plicare* to fold);

hence, that which is implied, is folded

in ; and has to be unfolded in order to

be understood.

As far as types of implicatures are concerned, Grice proposes two types of implicature. The conversational implicature refers to the implications which can be deduced from the form of an utterance, on the basis of certain cooperative principles which govern the efficiency and normal acceptability of conversations. The other type of implicature is the conventional implicature which is not derived from these principles rather it is derived from the conventions which are attached to particular expressions bearing in mind that this type of implicature is the most suitable type for the present study (Crystal, 2003:228).

2.2- Explicature

Explicature is "what the speaker expressed explicitly, or what was said. Whether the speaker spoke truly or not rests upon the truth or falsity of the explicature "

(Kearns, 2000:271). Contrarily, implicature

is what the speaker conveyed implicitly or what was implied. Linguistically speaking, pragmatics focuses on the role of contextual information in implicature, as defined in this two-way contrast, which suggests that pragmatics has little part to play, if any, in determining the explicature. Accordingly, one might assume, as Grice appeared to assume, that the explicature is just the literal meaning of the words the speaker uttered, given by core semantics.

Crystal (2003:228) views explicatures as "propositions which are explicitly communicated ". He (Ibid.) cites an example through which he draws a distinction between implicature and explicature:

(7) There is some chalk on the floor.

The above utterance implicates 'you ought to pick it up' but it explicates 'the fact that the chalk is on the floor'. Thus, the term implicature is mainly concerned with the implicit meaning of the utterances as shown in the above example. Contrarily, explicature has much to do with the explicit meaning of the utterances, i.e., the literal meaning of a given expression which could be true or false.

3- Maxims Flouting

When speakers appear not to follow the maxims but expect hearers to appreciate the meaning implied, one can say that they are flouting the maxims (Cutting, 2002:37). Finch (2000:160) enforces that floutings are apparent in the sense they enable someone to comply with the maxims indirectly rather than directly. For example, if someone says to his friend 'you are nice' and meanwhile he hates his friend, this can be viewed as a form of flouting since it only appears to violate the maxims of

quality. Another example is that the novelists flout the maxims of manner when they disrupt the story by using flashbacks or digressions.

Flouting, in other words, allows for a certain measure of creativity in communication. Participants are aware of an underlying tension between the simple maxim and its flouted form and this gives rise in many instances to indirect speech acts. The maxims are also the source of what Grice calls conversational implicatures (Ibid.). Grice (1975) argues that the maxim of quality is flouted by irony and metaphor (8) You are the cream in my coffee, and the hearer has to work out what it is that the speaker tries to convey. To interpret an utterance of the following sentence

(9) You are the cream in my coffee

the hearer must be assuming that the speaker is trying to convey something other than the literal meaning of the sentence. Since 'cream' is something which is not only a natural accompaniment to coffee, but a perfect accompaniment. The speaker is perhaps saying that the hearer possesses similar attributes. He is; therefore, paying the hearer a great compliment. As regards the flouting of quality maxim, Cutting

(2003:37) proves that the speaker who flouts the maxim of quantity seems to give too little or too much information.

(10) A- Well, how do I look ?

(11) B-Your shoes are nice...

(B) does not say that the sweat shirt and jeans do not look nice, but he knows that (A) will understand that implication, because (A) asks about his whole appearance and only gets told about part of it. He (Ibid.) adds that those who flout the maxims of manner, which seem to be obscure, are often trying to exclude some bits of the information which makes their statement ambiguous.

4- Idiomatic Expressions

The idiom refers to a sequence of words which is semantically and syntactically restricted. This idiomatic expression functions as a single unit. From a semantic point of view, the meanings of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole (Crystal, 2003:152). Linguistically, the idiom is defined more narrowly as a complex lexical item which is longer than a word form but shorter than a sentence. The idiom in fact has a meaning that cannot be derived from a knowledge of its component parts. Meaning is ; therefore, a decisive criterion for idioms. To contrast collocations and idioms, one can say that collocations consist of two word forms which are at the same time semantic constituents or lexical units. While the word forms in an idiom do not constitute lexical units and do not make an isolable contribution to the meaning of the whole (Gramely and Patzold, 1992:71). From a syntactic point of view, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts. For example :

(12) It is raining cats and dogs.

This sentence does not permit the following change: it is raining a cat and a dog / dogs and cats because these structures lack an internal contrastivity (Crystal, Ibid.).

5- Analysis of Maxims Flouting

The study analyzes the idiomatic expressions in terms of explicature and implicature then the results will be analyzed in terms of maxim flouting. As a result the study adopts a new model in analyzing the idiomatic expressions assuming that 'implicature' stands for the intended meaning of the idiomatic expression. The study grants the priority to the intended meaning of the idiomatic expression which can be captured throughout the implicatures. After getting the intended meaning of the idiomatic expression via implicature, the researchers will be able to analyze the flouting of the four maxims of these expressions. Accordingly, the first stage is to present the idiomatic expression and then give its explicature (literal meaning) . After that the researchers give its implicature (intended meaning) as given in AL-Mawrid Dictionary (1967) . As mentioned before, the second step is to reveal the flouting of Grice's maxims in the idiomatic expressions.)

(13) He kissed the dust توفي (Baalbaki, 1967:504)

Explicature :He kissed the ground .

Implicature: He died .

Maxims Flouting

'Be true', this principle which is related to the maxim of relation is flouted because it is not true that 'he kissed the dust' means 'he died'. This idiomatic expression confirms that there is a gap between the literal meaning (explicature) of the idiomatic expression and its metaphorical meaning (implicature).

It is ambiguous to say that 'kissing the dust' means someone died. This, in fact, shows that the maxims of manner is flouted due to the obscurity of the above idiomatic expression. The maxim of quality is also flouted because this expression lacks the truthfulness.

(14) This is a heavy hand ! هذا ظلم ! (Ibid.,:411).

Explicature: The hand (of human body) is heavy.

Implicature : This is an oppression.

Maxims Flouting

The idiomatic meaning of the above sentence 'this is a heavy hand' refers to 'oppression'. But one may think if this sentence is uttered in front of him, he will be sure that it means 'someone who has a great-weighted hand. Actually, this situation confirms that the maxim of manner is already flouted due to the violation of the principle 'avoid ambiguity'. There is no relationship between the word 'hand' and the word 'oppression' from the semantic point of view which is an indication that the maxim of relation (Be true) is flouted. Obviously, the maxim of quality is flouted due to the violation of the principle "Do not say what you believe to be false".

(15) The boss is a bad egg المدير شخص لا قيمة له (Ibid.,:304).

Explicature : The boss is a bad egg .

Implicature : The boss is a bad person.

Maxims Flouting

The maxim of manner is entirely flouted in the sense that the principles 'avoid obscurity of expression' and 'avoid ambiguity' are not fulfilled. This, in return, means that there is an ambiguity in saying that 'the boss is a bad egg' which implicitly means a bad person. Moreover, it is not relevant to make a comparison between the person and the bad egg. But this means that the maxim of relevance is flouted, too. As it is not plausible that the word 'egg' represents 'person' in terms of a general comparison; therefore, this constitutes an evidence that the maxim of quality is flouted because logically the 'bad egg' does not mean the 'bad person'. Therefore, this idiom lacks the truth.

(16) Hang up your hat خذ راحتك (Ibid.,:415)

Explicature : Put your hat on the hang .

Implicature : Have your rest; feel at home.

Maxims Flouting

According to the idiomatic meaning of the above phrase which implicates 'feel at home or behave freely, the maxim of relation (relevance) is entirely flouted because it is clear that there is no relationship between the literal meaning of the idiomatic expression and its idiomatic meaning. Besides, the maxim of manner is also flouted because the principle of the manner maxim 'avoid ambiguity' is not taken into

consideration,i.e., it is not achieved. Therefore, it will be ambiguous to tell someone 'hang up your hat' and it happens that this person does not have a hat on his head. This situation will bring about misunderstanding because the speaker means something else implicitly beyond the literal meaning of the above expression upon uttering it .On the other hand, the addressee will understand that the speaker sarcases him because the addressee takes the literal meaning into consideration only; therefore, one can say that the maxim of quality is flouted because the truth is not achieved.

(17) He lost his shirt **فقد كل ما يملك** (Ibid .,:847)

Explicature : He lost his dress (the shirt) .

Implicature : He lost his fortune .

Maxims Flouting

In terms of explicature the above expression means that the person lost his dress and this is the explicit (literal meaning of the expression).But implicitly ,i.e., in terms of implicature ,the expression means that the person 'lost his fortune'. Thereupon, one can conclude that the three maxims : quality,manner, and relation are flouted .Clearly, this idiomatic expression does not represent the truth ' he lost his fortune' rather it represents the truth ' he lost his shirt (dress)' .The truth beyond this idiomatic expression is 'he lost his fortune' .This means that both maxims (quality and relation) are flouted.This expression lacks the semantic relationship between the two words 'shirt' and 'fortune' because it is ambiguous to use the word 'shirt' to implicate implicitly 'fortune' .This is a hint that the maxim of manner is flouted due to the ambiguity that can be observed in the word "shirt".

(18) The student burnt the midnight oil

متأخرة من الليل درس الطالب حتى ساعة (Ibid.,:577)

Explicature : The student burnt the oil at midnight.

Implicature : The student studied hard.

Maxims Flouting

The above expression means that the student studied hard or studied till midnight. But if someone hears this expression, he would think that the student burnt the oil at midnight. Definitely, the above discussion shows that the maxim of manner is flouted in the sense that the above expression is ambiguous. In other words, it is not possible that ' The student burnt the midnight oil' means literally 'he studied hard '.Furthermore, the maxim of quality is flouted because the truthfulness does not exist in this idiomatic expression.

(19) I am in the box **أنا في ورطه** (Ibid.,: 1578)

Explicature :The speaker is inside the box .

Implicature :The speaker is in trouble .

Maxims Flouting

Obviously,both the maxims of quality and relation are flouted because the speaker does not mean metaphorically that he is inside the box rather this idiomatic expression means 'in trouble '.In terms of the manner maxim, it is ambiguous to say 'in the box' to mean 'in trouble' which means that the maxim of manner is flouted as well.

(20) He kicked the bucket توفي (Ibid.,:257)

Explicature : He blew the bucket by his foot.

Implicature : He died.

Maxims Flouting

There is a flouting of the three maxims quality, relation, and manner. The flouting of quality and relation maxims occurs because it is not believable that 'kicking the bucket' means 'death'. On the other hand, this idiomatic expression bears an ambiguity which, in its turn, means that the maxim of manner is flouted.

(21) My uncle is in the clouds عمي شارد الذهن (Ibid.)

Explicature : My uncle is over the clouds in the sky .

Implicature : My uncle is absent- minded .

Maxims Flouting

In fact, the above expression lacks the truthfulness because it is not true to see a person riding over the clouds. This proves that both maxims of relation and quality are flouted. The phrase 'in the clouds' means implicitly 'absent-minded' but explicitly it means 'he is over the clouds'. Consequently, this phrase is obscure if it is taken implicitly. So one can conclude that the maxim of manner is flouted due to the obscurity of this idiom.

(22) Keep your shirt on ! أحتفظ بهدوء أعصابك (Ibid.,:847)

Explicature : Do not lose your shirt (dress) !

Implicature : Calm down !

Maxims Flouting

If someone tells you 'keep your shirt on', presumably you will understand that the speaker advises you not to lose your shirt. However, this is not the intended meaning underlying this idiomatic expression rather it means 'calm down'. This of course, means that the maxim of quality and the maxim of relation are flouted because of lacking the truthfulness and familiarity. This idiomatic expression bears no relationship between the literal meaning of the words and the idiomatic expression of the phrase . Moreover, there is an indication that the maxim of manner is flouted because the intended meaning (Calm down) as compared with the literal meaning (Do not lose your shirt) reveals that the above expression is ambiguous.

6- Conclusions

The study comes up with certain conclusions. The three maxims of quality, manner, and relevance are flouted in the case of the idiomatic expressions. But the maxim of quantity is clearly not flouted because the idiomatic expressions are distinguished by having short and informative forms and this, in return, matches the requirements of the quantity maxim such as 'make your contribution as informative as is required'.

The study also proves that the idiomatic expression depends on the metaphorical meaning of the words and this brings about a gap between the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning of the idiomatic expression. Thus,

if any one takes the literal meaning of the idiomatic expression into consideration, these words will no longer be idiomatic. In the case of having an idiomatic expression, everybody is obliged to take the metaphorical meaning not the literal meaning. This reveals that the readers will realize that the maxims of quality and relevance are flouted because the idiom in question lacks the truthfulness. Therefore, taking the metaphorical meaning (implicit meaning) represents the flouting of the maxims of quality and relation. Similarly, in the case of the manner maxims, if one takes the metaphorical meaning of the idiom, the idiom will be ambiguous.

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