

## When and where to use idioms

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*There are several words in frequent use which have functions other than the ones with which the learner may immediately associate them. Let us illustrate this. If the learner is asked what he knows about the word 'there', he will most probably say what he knows about its grammatical function as an adverb of place. In the same way, a description of 'shall' or 'should' would certainly include reference to the future and conditional tenses. We therefore call such words 'words with grammatical functions'.*

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We have now taken about several aspects of idioms: where they come from, their form, their meaning, if and how we can vary them. We shall now look at the reasons for the difficulties which foreign learners experience when they try to use idioms.

One of the main difficulties is that the learner does not know in which situations it is correct to use an idiom. He does not know the level of style, that is, whether an idiom can be used in a formal or in an informal situation. Help is given in this book with the markings formal and informal. Unmarked idioms can be used in any situation.

Choice of words depends on the person one is speaking to and on the situation or place at the time. If the person is a friend and the situation is private, we may use informal or even slang expressions. In a formal situation, when we do not know the person we are speaking to very well or the occasion is public, we choose words much more carefully. It would be wrong to choose an informal expression in some rather formal situation and bad manners to choose a slang expression. This means that we can express the same information or idea in more one way using a different level. Here is an example. If one arrives late when meeting a friend, a typical informal way of apologizing would be: "Sorry I'm late!- but I got badly help up". However, if one come too late to a meeting with strangers or a business meeting, another choice of expression for the apology would be appropriate, perhaps "I do apologize for being late. I'm afraid my train was delayed."

The expressions marked formal are found in written more than in spoken English and are used to show a distant relationship between the speakers. Such expressions would be used for example when making a formal speech to a large audience. Expressions marked informal are used in every-day spoken English and in personal letters. (Slang expressions are used in very informal situations between good friends. Learners should not make frequent use of slang expressions as they usually - but unexpectedly - become out-of-date and sounds strange.) It is advisable to concentrate on the expressions which are marked informal and on the unmarked expressions which are neutral in style and can be used in any situation.

Another major difficulty is that the learner does not know if an idiom is natural or appropriate in a certain situation. This can only be learnt by careful listening to native speakers or careful reading of English texts which contain idioms. In order help the learner with this difficulty, examples of usage in typical situations are given where it seems necessary. The learner should take careful note of these examples.

The third major difficulty is that of fixed idioms and only partly fixed idioms, which has already been discussed. It is most important that the learner should be exact in his use of fixed idioms, as an inaccurate idiom may mean very little or even nothing at all to a native speaker. Above all, remember that it is usually extremely unwise to translate idioms into English from one's own native language. One may be lucky that the two languages have the same form and vocabulary, but in most cases, the result will be utterly bewildering to the native speaker- and possibly highly amusing.

As was said earlier, the correct use of idiomatic English should be the aim of every learner. It is an aim which is worthwhile and satisfying. Mastery of idiom comes only slowly, through careful study and observation, through practice and experience, but remember: practice makes perfect and all things are difficult before they are easy.

Explanations have been kept as short as possible. They should not be regarded as 'rules' but as descriptions of what the native speaker explanations are followed by an example from everyday usage.

## Literature

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