The analysis of J. Strassler's "Idioms in English: A Pragmatic Analysis"

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Abstract: Strassler's aims in *Idioms in English: A Pragmatic Analysis*, a book deriving from a doctoral thesis, are twofold:

1 The identification of idiom functions, hence Strassler's choice of pragmatic theories in terms of which to analyse idiom use.

2 The identification of the special features of idioms which set them apart from the rest of the vocabulary, features which also constitute their raison.

Strassler's thesis reflects these two aims:

… Every idiom has a non-idiomatic synonym on the semantic level.the question now remains as to why idioms exist and why they can only be used under certain circumstances… . I trust I shall find elements within idioms which they do not share with their literal counterparts.[1]

Key words: semantics, non-idiomatic synonym, idioms, expressions, social status, age, education.

The different social implications of *She died* and *She snuffed* it are used by Strassler, along with other types of evidence, in support of his thesis.

What I have noted so far concerning Strassler's study of idioms should make it clear that it differs quite strikingly from the work already reviewed. Strassler explores idiom structure primarily through his review of scholarly work (the Soviet phraseologists, Makkai

1972, Weinreich 1969, Faser1970, Healey 1968, etc.), not through any independent investigation of his own. However, his comments on this work pinpoint what are to him the significant features of idioms:

… the fact that the meaning of an idiom is not deducible from its constituents entails certain barriers to structural changes.[2]

Like Makkai (1972), Strassler cites sense 3a of the OED definition of idiom claiming it provides 'the best framework for categorizing the different notions of idiomaticity'. He does, however, give his own working definition of an idiom:

An *idiom* is a concatenation of more than one lexeme whose meaning is not derived from the meanings of its constituents and which does not consist of a verb plus an adverbial particle or preposition. The concatenation such as then constitutes a lexeme in its own right and should be entered as such in the lexicon.

Strassler's study is the first major work to appear on the functions of idiom. Such a task requires corpus substantiation, in this case one that takes into consideration a number of socially significant variables: 'social status, age, education and profession and wherever possible, the gap between the partners'. Strassler's data is only of the conversational sort gathered from 'transcripts of trials, recordings of therapeutic sessions and excerpts from the White House

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[1] **Strassler, J**. *Idioms in English:* A Pragmatic Analysis. Tubingen: Verlag. 1982. P. 85

[2] **Strassler, J**. *Idioms in English:* A Pragmatic Analysis. Tubingen: Verlag. 1982. P. 86

transcripts totaling approximately 106,000 words and yielding 92 idioms. Strassler argues that :

 … when using an idiom the speaker conveys more information than its semantic content. He either establishes a social hierarchy or he tests the hearer's opinion in this matter.[3]

Demonstrating the working of such a social hierarchy by analyzing the deictic use of idioms in conversation between participants of equal or higher/lower social status in a variety of situations constitutes the most insightful part of Strassler's book.

 Strassler notes that the deictic use of idioms covers personal reference (first person idioms), reference to the communicative partner (second person idioms), and to a third person or object. Examples are given of all these types of deixis. Strassler states that third person deixis is the commonest identifiable function of idioms in his conversational data and concludes on this evidence   that such usage is unmarked and neutral. Idioms used for first and second person reference are marked. The reason for this markedness lies in the social relations between conversational partners, what Strassler calls social deixis. Examination of a variety of participant exchange in different situations lead Strassler to conclude that the deictic use of idioms is determined by the social status of the users in relation to their conversational partners:

The second person idiom is restricted to the communicative partner of higher status, the first person idiom to the lower status partner. This pattern is so strong that there are hardly any exceptions to be found.

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[3] **Strassler, J**. *Idioms in English:* A Pragmatic Analysis. Tubingen: Verlag. 1982. P. 24

Third person idioms being neutral are unrestricted and so may be used by anybody unless the status difference between participants is too great as in the case of a patient and his therapist. Similarly, the use of first person idioms is open to anybody but is avoided by dominating speakers as, according to Strassler, 'they have a self abasement effect' . Second person idioms are the most restricted idioms as their us is socially acceptable only among peers. Strassler, therefore, concludes that idioms function as status markers and accordingly their use or non-use among conversational partners is a form of social membershipping. These deictic elements are not present in the literal synonyms of idioms: consequently, the additional deictic informational idioms convey constitute their functional *raison* while at the same time accounting for their presence or their absence in different situations.

 Strassler's thesis that idioms convey information absent in their denotative semantic component, a component they share with their non-idiomatic synonyms, is probably correct: so are his observations   on the distribution   of deictic idioms. There is nothing to contradict Strassler's evidence in the much bigger corpora I have used for my own study. What is the wanting in Strassler's study is a more precise and fuller account of the nature of the special information conveyed by idioms but not by their non-idiomatic synonyms. The use of idioms is a stylistic strategy made possible by the expressive meanings present in idioms but not in their non-idiomatic synonyms: *snuff it,* like *kick the bucket*, are marked as slang and convey an irreverent jocularity which the unmarked die does not. Accordingly, the kind of idioms Strassler's corpus contains is strongly evaluative: negative + *worth sbit, have a chip on one's shoulder, have an axe to grind*, etc. Avoidance of evaluation, whether good

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or bad, could very well explain the distribution of idioms in personal and social deixis. The strength of Strassler's study lies in its focus on the deictic functions of idioms. Its weakness is the absence of a fuller analysis of the special information he rightly claims idioms convey such as, for instance, why the self-referential use of idioms could have a 'self abasement effect'.

This article draws attention to the variety of multiword expressions identified as idioms as well as to their centrality in English. Both these factors require the idiomatologist to define idioms in such a way that the definition captures this range and accordingly their centrality without being at the same time a catch-all for every word combination in a language. Some scholars such as Makkai, Weinreich, use the absence of a literal counterpart to exclude certain expressions from the domain of the idiomatic. Others (Strassler 1982) arbitrarily exclude phrasal verbs. All the scholars reviewed are to a greater or lesser extend influenced by the OED definition of idioms, though this is much more evident in the work of some (Makkai 1972, Strassler 1982) than in that of others. It is the least evident in Cowie (1975, 1983). Cowie not only note variations: they also link such variations to the practicalities of language use.

While Makkai and Cowie comment briefly on ht efunctions of idioms, the most detailed treatment of this topic comes from Strassler (1982), who analysis the pragmatic functions of idioms, drawing, like Cowie, on a body of naturally-occurring data.

That idiomaticity does not appear in the same degree in all multiword expressions is recognized by a number of scholars. Multiword expressions range from those that qualify as pure or par excellence idioms through semi-idioms to various types of collocations with marginal idiomatic status. The best means of accommodating such a phenomenon is a scale, scales being common to several language models: transformational (Fraser 1970), functional (Halliday 1978), and structural (Bolinger 1975). A scale of idiomaticity such as that first used for idioms by Cowie, permits discussion of expressions as diverse as *make up, put up with, spill the beans, take a step, a blue film/joke,* etc. which appear in either volume1(1975) of volume 2 (1983) of the ODCIE. The inclusion of expressions like a chequered career/history in these dictionaries make possible discussion of a class of freer expressions idiomatic only in the sense of being predictable collocations in English as, for example, *addled eggs/brains* or *violent campaign/backlash, peace talks,* etc. both of which are familiar combinations in media reportage. Acceptance of such predictable, often recombinable, collocations as marginally idiomatic makes identification of an interface possible between idioms and semi-idioms on the one hand and the ad hoc collocations of the rest of the vocabulary on the others.

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