This comprehensive, up-to-date, and accessible text on idiom use, learning, and teaching approaches the topic with a balance of sound theory and extensive research in cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, corpus linguistics, and sociolinguistics, and informed teaching practices. *Idioms* is organized in three parts.

- Part I includes discussion of idiom definition, classification, usage patterns, and functions.
- Part II investigates the process involved in the comprehension of idioms and the factors that influence individuals’ understanding and use of idioms in both L1 and L2.
- Part III explores idiom acquisition and the teaching and learning of idioms, focusing especially on the strategies and techniques used to help students learn idioms.

To assist the reader in grasping the key issues, study questions are provided at the end of each chapter. The book also includes a glossary of special terms and an annotated list of selective idiom reference books and student textbooks.

*Idioms* is designed to serve either as a textbook for ESL/applied linguistics teacher education courses or as a reference book. No matter how the book is used, it will equip ESL/applied linguistics students and professionals with a solid understanding of various issues related to idioms and the learning of them.

**Dilin Liu,** Ph.D., teaches at The University of Alabama, USA.
IDIOMS
DESCRIPTION, COMPREHENSION, ACQUISITION, AND PEDAGOGY

Dilin Liu
TO YUN, MY DEAR WIFE,
WITH LOVE AND DEEP AFFECTION
Contents

List of tables xi
Preface xiii

Part I: Idioms and Their Use 1

1 Idiom Definition and Classification 3
   Introduction 3
   Defining idioms: Diverse views 4
   A perspective from language learners 13
   Classification of idioms 16
   Phrasal verbs: A unique group of idioms 21
   Summary 23

2 Idiom Use: Function, Variation, Frequency, and Register 25
   Introduction 25
   The idiom principle 25
   Function 27
   Variation 36
   Frequency 39
   Register 40
   Culture and idiom use 41
   Summary 42
Part II: Idiom Comprehension

3 L1 Idiom Processing and Comprehension

Introduction 47
Five major processing models 48
The "syntactic and semantic processing disassociation" hypothesis 56
The “idiom key” hypothesis 59
Summary 63

4 L2 Idiom Processing and Comprehension

Introduction 65
Major strategies used in L2 idiom comprehension 66
Heuristic approach: A distinctive L2 idiom processing model? 73
Summary 74

5 Factors that Affect Idiom Comprehension

Introduction 77
Factors relating to idioms and their use 77
Factors relating to language users 84
Factors affecting L2 idiom comprehension only 87
Summary 88

Part III: Idiom Acquisition and Pedagogy

6 Idiom Acquisition and Its Importance in Language Development

Introduction 93
Knowledge and skills required for idiom acquisition 94
The role of rote learning in idiom acquisition 98
The effect of different types of idioms and sequence of idiom acquisition 101
The importance of idiom acquisition in language development 103
A caveat 105
Summary 105

7 Selection and Organization of Idioms for Learning and Instruction

Introduction 107
Selection criteria and useful selection practices 107
Types of idiom information that need to be provided 113
Organizing idioms for instruction and retention 115
Passive versus active idioms 118
Summary 118
Tables

1.1 Summary of Major Scholars’ Views on Criteria for Idioms 14
2.1 Major Functions of Idioms 29
3.1 Empirical Predictions Made by the Three Models 58
5.1 Percentage of Idiomatic Answers by Age Groups and Context 85
5.2 Percentage of Completion Answer Types by Two Age Groups 86
8.1 Summary Chart of Intelligences and Suggested Activities for Teaching and Learning Idioms 133
Because of the ubiquity of idioms in human language, a decent command of a language entails a grasp of some of its basic idioms. In fact, the level of command of idioms is an important indicator of second language (L2) proficiency (Howarth, 1998; Weinert, 1995; Yorio, 1989). Yet the acquisition of idioms in L2 is no easy task. According to many scholars (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2005; Cooper, 1998, 1999; Cornell, 1999; Irujo, 1986a, 1986b, 1993; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Kövecses and Szabó, 1996, to cite a few), idioms are one of the most difficult aspects in L2 acquisition due to the fact that they are conventionalized expressions peculiar to a language community and they are usually frozen in form and often unpredictable in meaning—that is, their meaning cannot always be derived from the literal meanings of the components involved. Many L2 learners probably have a few anecdotes to tell about the difficulty they have experienced with idioms.

For example, Makkai (1993), a Russian immigrant turned professor of linguistics, recalls the following incident to illustrate the problem that idioms might present to L2 speakers:

I was a recently arrived refugee immigrant in the United States when, shortly before the end of my 6th month in Boston, someone said, “You can’t be serious, you’re pulling my leg.” I was startled and in broken phrases apologized, “pardon me, Sir, I did not mean to touch your foot.” (p. 303)

As an immigrant and an English as a second language (ESL) learner-turned L2 educator myself, I also have quite a few anecdotes to share. An international student of mine once told me of an embarrassing experience he had. One day, the professor of one of his classes told the class that their plan to visit a museum had fallen through. Hearing that, the student voiced
a cheer of joy because he thought it meant the visit was going to happen, for in his mind the particle “through” in the phrase meant “no glitches” and hence “fall through” implied the same thing as “go through.” Obviously, he was wrong. Of course, Makkai and the student of mine are not the only ones to have made this type of mistake. Many L2 educators also have anecdotes about their students’ misunderstanding of idioms. Larsen-Freeman (2007) in her plenary speech at the Forty-first Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Convention told the following story. One day she was late for her class and she explained to the students that she had run across an old friend. Her students were all startled, thinking she had literally run a person over, and asked if the person was all right. Misunderstanding or feeling lost is very common for L2 learners when they encounter a new idiom.

It is, thus, no wonder that L2 teachers are constantly bombarded by students’ complaints about the difficulty of idioms and by their questions about these expressions. Yet despite the challenges that idioms present, the issue of L2 idiom acquisition and instruction has so far failed to receive adequate attention. Although one can find some idiom textbooks for L2 students and some articles about idiom use, acquisition, and teaching, to my knowledge there has not been a professional book devoted to the topic. A lack of comprehensive coverage on the issue is really unfortunate, because for L2 teachers, especially those who are new to the field or still in training, a basic understanding of idiom use and learning is extremely important to their success in dealing with this difficult aspect of language.

For more than a decade, I have been reading and doing research on idioms in preparation of a book that I hope will provide teachers with this basic knowledge. I have approached the task from two angles: that of an ESL learner and that of an ESL educator and researcher. From the perspective of the former, I have been reading and learning about various English idioms and their usages; from that of the latter, I have been studying what idioms really are and how they are learned and taught in general. In the process, I have learned to appreciate the complexity of many of the issues involved with idioms, the lack of consensus among scholars regarding, among other things, idiom definition, and the inadequacy of our understanding of how idioms are processed and acquired and what strategies learners use in understanding idioms. As a result, in this book I have decided to take the approach of presenting and assessing all the different views scholars hold on many of these issues, rather than embracing just one view, so as to give the reader a more complete understanding. For example, my discussion concerning what constitutes an idiom covers the entire echelon of positions ranging from those who advocate an unusually broad definition, to a few who espouse an extremely narrow one.
OVERVIEW

Comprising ten chapters in three parts and drawing from the existing theories and research that date back to the 1950s, this book aims to offer a comprehensive, up-to-date coverage of idioms, the comprehension and acquisition of idioms, and the learning and teaching of idioms. This book is designed to serve either as a textbook for ESL/applied linguistics teacher education courses or as a reference book. In the former capacity, the book may either serve as a textbook for courses on teaching specific language skills such as vocabulary and idioms or function as a recommended reading or reference book for other TESOL courses such as L2 language acquisition and teaching methodology. No matter how the book is used, a reading of it should equip an ESL/applied linguistics professional with a solid understanding of various issues related to idioms and the learning of them.

Specifically, Part I of the book discusses, among other things, idiom definition, classification, usage patterns, and functions. Part II investigates the process involved in the comprehension and the factors that influence individuals’ understanding and use of idioms in both L1 and L2. Part III explores idiom acquisition and the teaching and learning of idioms, focusing especially on the strategies and techniques used to help students learn idioms. To assist the reader in grasping the key issues, study questions are provided at the end of each chapter. The book also contains a glossary of special terms and an annotated list of selective idiom reference books and student textbooks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank Eli Hinkel, the editor of the ESL and Applied Linguistics Professional Series (to which this book belongs), for giving me invaluable advice and suggestions over the course of the development of the book. I owe the same gratitude to Paul Nation, who in his review of the book proposal and most of its chapters provided me with extremely helpful comments and suggestions for developing and revising the book. Similarly, I need to express my appreciation to Naomi Silverman, the LEA ESL/Applied Linguistics editor, for her encouragement and clear directions in the preparation of the manuscript. I would also like to convey my appreciation to an anonymous reviewer of the manuscript for the useful comments and suggestions. Finally, my graduate students Jennifer Colvard, Adam Copeland, Kelly McPherson, Pat Norton, and Rui Zuo either proofread the manuscript or helped with the index and I would like to thank them for helping improve the accuracy of the book. Of course, I alone am responsible for whatever errors and shortcomings remain.
PART I

IDIOMS AND THEIR USE
Idiom Definition and Classification

INTRODUCTION

What constitutes an idiom is a very important yet difficult initial question for all those interested in the study of idioms, including those in the business of learning or teaching idioms (Cornell, 1999; Fernando, 1978, 1996; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Liu, 2003; Moon, 1998; Tabossi & Zardon, 1993; M. M. Wood, 1981). A fairly extensive reading of publications on idioms will reveal that the definition of idiom often varies considerably from scholar to scholar. For some scholars, and in a broad sense, the term is rather inclusive, covering, among other things, all fixed phrases, clichés, formulaic speeches, proverbs, slang expressions, and, at the extreme, even single polysemic words. For example, Cooper (1998), Hockett (1958), and Katz and Postal (1963) have included as idioms individual words, especially those used metaphorically such as the word “weigh” in the phrase “weigh a decision.” Yet for other scholars, and in a more restrictive use, “idiom” is a much narrower term, referring only to those “fixed and semantically opaque or metaphorical” expressions such as kick the bucket or spill the beans (Moon, 1998, p. 4); for a very few, the concept of “idiom” even excludes metaphorical idiomatic expressions (Grant & Bauer, 2004). Confronted with these diverse definitions of idiom, one will have to agree with Moon (1998) that “[i]diom is an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways” (p. 3). What makes the term ambiguous is, of course, the fact that idioms are “multifaceted objects” that are “not only complex, but also in many ways elusive” (Tabossi & Zardon, 1993, p. 145). For such a complex and elusive concept, perhaps no single definition can be adequate or even possible, certainly not for scholars whose research interests vary significantly.
This chapter will first review the major theories and practices concerning the definition of idiom so as to provide the reader with a basic understanding of what scholars in general believe constitutes an idiom. It will then briefly explore the perspective of second language learners on idiom definition. Addressing the issue from the learners’ perspective is necessary because learners’ criteria for identifying idioms may sometimes differ from those of researchers due to the learners’ unique interest in idioms: to learn to understand and use them. The chapter will end with a discussion of the major approaches and systems that scholars have employed in classifying idioms.

DEFINING IDIOMS: DIVERSE VIEWS

Of the scholars who have dealt with the issue of defining what constitutes an idiom, Hockett (1958) appears to espouse the broadest definition. To him, any language element whose meaning cannot be deduced from its structure is an idiom, including units as small as morphemes (e.g. work, ed, tele, phone, class, and room) and as large as clauses (e.g. What’s up?). Because Hockett is perhaps the only person who has considered individual morphemes as idioms, it is important that we understand his reasons for doing so. In his theory, work, ed, class, and room are each idioms because one cannot deduce the meaning of each of the morphemes from its structure. On the other hand, the words worked, biology, and classroom are not idioms because one can easily determine the meaning of each of these words by looking at its two composing morphemes or idioms. Work-ed means the past tense of work, biology refers to “life study” or the study of life, and classroom signifies the room for classes. In fact, in Hockett’s theory every morpheme is an idiom except “when it is occurring as a constituent of a large idiom, since a morpheme has no structure from which its meaning could be deduced.” (1958, p. 172). Hockett illustrates his point as follows:

Thus new is an idiom in She wants a new hat, but not in I’m going to New York, because it is part of the larger idiom New York. New York, in turn, is an idiom in the preceding sentence but not in The New York Times or The New Yorker, since in the latter expressions New York occurs as part of larger idioms. (p. 172)

However, if we use Hockett’s definition we will soon discover that there are simply too many language items that will be labeled idioms. Hence, his definition of idiom is too broad to be of much practical value in idiom research, learning, and teaching.

While Hockett appears to be the only scholar who has considered individual morphemes as idioms, there are a few who believe that individual words consisting of polymorphemes such as greenhouse and telephone should
be classified as idioms. Katz and Postal (1963) and Makkai (1972) are representatives of this group. To Katz and Postal (1963), “[t]he essential feature of an idiom is that its full meaning, and more generally, the meaning of any sentence containing an idiomatic structure, is not a compositional function of the meanings of the idiom’s elementary grammatical parts” (p. 275). In other words, any linguistic structure (including polymorphemic words) whose meaning is not the compositional meaning of its constituent parts is an idiom. On such a definition, greenhouse is an idiom because its meaning as a place for nursing plants is not the composite meaning of the morphemes green and house. Similarly, telephone is an idiom because its meaning as a device for long-distance talk does not really come from the composite meaning of the morphemes tele (far) and phone (sound)—that is, a “far sound” does not equate to a “long-distance talk device” (although one may infer the meaning from the context in which the two-morpheme word is used). In contrast, words like unsafe and overestimate are not idioms because the meaning of each is indeed the compositional meaning of its constituents. For example, the meaning of “not safe” comes directly from the combined meanings of its two constituent morphemes, un and safe.

Of course, according to Katz and Postal’s definition of idiom, not only can polymorphemic words be idioms, but so too can phrases whose meaning is not the composite meaning of their elementary structures, such as kick the bucket. Katz and Postal differentiate these two types of idioms, though. They call the idioms made up of polymorphemic words “lexical idioms” and those consisting of multiple words “phrase idioms” (Katz & Postal, 1963, pp. 275–276). In their theory, one that Katz further elaborated in an article in 1973, the two types of idioms differ in two important aspects. First, they differ in structure, with lexical idioms belonging to “the lowest syntactic categories (noun, verb, adjective, and so on),” and the second type falling into “higher syntactic categories (phrases, clauses, and sentences)” (Katz, 1973, p. 360). Second, the types of idioms also differ in the way they are stored in a speaker’s language system. Lexical idioms, like all other individual words, are stored in a person’s lexicon, but phrasal idioms are registered differently in an idiom list because these idioms may have two possible meanings, with one being the composite or literal meaning of its syntactic elements (kick the bucket = “strike the bucket with one’s foot”) and the other being the idiomatic meaning, one that is not derived from its syntactic elements (kick the bucket = “die”). Using a generative-transformational approach, Katz and Postal’s identification of “phrase idioms” relies largely on the test of whether a phrase is productive and transformation-permissible. Phrase idioms are not productive or transformation-permissible. For example, “put one’s foot in the mouth” and “eat one’s words” cannot be turned into passive without losing their idiomatic meaning. This use of generative-transformational approach is the trademark of Katz and Postal’s study and it makes their analysis rather formal.
Makkai (1972) also considers some polymorphemic words as idioms, but, unlike Katz and Postal (1963), Makkai believes that only polymorphemic words consisting of at least two free morphemes, such as *blackmail*, may qualify as idioms. In other words, polymorphemic words made up of only one free morpheme plus one or more bound morphemes, such as *telephone* (*tele* as a bound morpheme or an affix and *phone* a free morpheme), cannot be classified as idioms because there are adequate morphological rules for decoding first the bound morphemes and then the words containing the morphemes. For example, knowing the meaning of the affix *tele*, one may fairly easily predict the meaning of a word containing it, such as *telescope*. In other words, the meaning of such a polymorphemic word is deducible from its constituent parts. In contrast, the meaning of an idiom is not deducible from its elementary parts because, Makkai (1972, p. 120) argues, these elementary parts so put together can “potentially mislead” or “disinform” a listener or reader. For instance, the meaning of *blackmail* as “extortion by threats” is not derived from the meanings of the two free morphemes, *black* and *mail*. So it seems that Makkai’s and Katz and Postal’s definitions are really the same in the sense that both insist that the meaning of an idiom cannot be derived from its individual components. Yet they disagree on whether the meaning of a word consisting of one bound and one free morpheme can be derived from its components, with Katz and Postal saying yes and Makkai claiming no. Thus, in terms of polymorphemic idioms, Makkai’s definition appears narrower than Katz and Postal’s. Yet Makkai’s overall notion of idioms is much broader than Katz and Postal’s, as will be shown below.

Applying Lamb’s (1962) stratificational grammar, Makkai renders a very formal study of idioms. He identifies two major types of idioms: idioms of **encoding** (also called phraseological idioms) and idioms of **decoding** (also known as semantic idioms). The former refers to stable collocations peculiar to a language. An example cited in his discussion is *drive at 70 m.p.h.* rather than *with 70 p.m.h.*, as is used in French. These expressions are called idioms solely for their phraseological peculiarities (Makkai, 1972, pp. 56–57). The latter type, idioms of **decoding**, on the other hand, comprise expressions that possess a non-literal meaning such as *red herring* and *come up*. These idioms are all potentially misleading or have “disinformation potential,” as can be seen in the two examples just mentioned. Each of them has both a literal and a figurative meaning: *red herring* = (1) a type of fish that is red, and (2) a phony issue; and *come up* = (1) move to a position as in “come up to the front,” and (2) occur or be mentioned as in “the issue came up at the meeting.” All idioms of decoding are, of course, idioms of encoding because they are also rather fixed and unique in composition. Because of their meaning opacity and structural uniqueness, idioms of decoding are the focus of Makkai’s study.

Like Katz and Postal (1963), Weinreich (1969), another important scholar on the topic, also employed the principles of generative-transformational