

On the Nonce Variant of English Idioms*

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English idiom variant refers to the form of idiom created by means of altering some original components, structures, or meanings of the former idioms. The nonce variant of English idioms can be analyzed from the following four aspects: reasons for formation of nonce variant, types into which it could be divided, motivations of nonce variant, and rhetorical functions it is capable of producing. Through the analysis of these four aspects, it is almost likely for language-users to realize the importance and modes of idiom's renovation and get a better understanding of English idioms, thus utilize English idioms more skillfully.

Keywords: English idiom, nonce variant, form and meaning, modes of renovation

Introduction

As an essential component in English lexicon, English idioms are set phrases or short sentences abstracted from English in the long-term process of the language development. There are two most obvious characteristics of idioms. One is semantic unity, which connotes that idiom is an inseparable semantic unity. Usually an idiom's meaning could not be inferred from each part. The other one is structural stability. That is, the arrangement and collocation of an idiom are fixed. Sentence structures are not flexible.

The viewpoint of its semantic unity and structural unity has played a dominant role in the researches of English idioms. Till the 1950s, Chomsky proposed the transformational-generative grammar, under which a linguist Fraser (1970) went to develop the transformational potential of idioms. In *ODCIE* compiled by English scholars, Cowie and Mackin (1975) confirmed the existence of one-off variation. They held that English idiom's stability in structure and overall meaning is not so absolute. That is, idioms can be varied in specific contexts. Furthermore, we can also find out a great deal of idiom variations in the process of using English.

English idiom variant refers to the form of idiom created by means of altering some original components, structures, or meanings of the former idioms. As far as the types of idiom variant are concerned, two broad types of variation are classified: normal variant and nonce variant. Normal variant refers to the institutionalized variation, which aims at producing correct forms of idioms. Nonce variant refers to the temporary manipulation or exploitation of idioms, which may change an idiom's form and meaning (ZHANG, 1980).

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Reasons for the Formation of Nonce Variant

A Special Feature of Language—Creativity

The creativity of language, endowing English idioms with potential for development, refers to the potential possibility that language holds to create endless sentences (WANG, 2007).

Idioms, whose structures are fixed relatively, can be divided, deleted, reconstructed, etc. New forms of expression are produced; more appropriate sentences appear for temporary uses. For example:

Example (1) Modern journalism justifies its own existence by the great Darwinian principle of “the survival of the vilest” (JU, 2004, p. 39).

Example (2) While marrying the girl he “married a bit more than he could chew” (XU, 2006, p. 89).

In the first example, “the survival of the vilest” is the nonce variant of an idiom “the survival of the fittest”. The structures are of the same, but the meanings are different owing to the transformation of one word: “fittest” to “vilest”. In the second example, the original form of “married a bit more than he could chew” is “the bit off a bit more than one could chew”. The word has been changed, but the meaning becomes fitter for the context.

Association Between Language and Society

As a part of social culture, language finds its expression in the renewing of existing forms of language for development. Idioms complicated in meaning have been knocked out in the use of language. In the process of using idioms, people enrich the connotation and border of idioms continuously, both endowing idioms with vigor, and augmenting the ability in expressing idioms by innovating the existing idioms.

Economic Principle and Other Circumstances Confining Language

To describe the present situation, or to express one's emotion, or to communicate with each other, people usually tend to use the simplest words and sentences. So idioms are always considered as the first choice. However, it is always impossible to use the formulaic idioms directly due to the limitation of place, topic, background knowledge, purpose, and method of communication in concrete occasions. To make some changes conforming to specific communicative circumstances will achieve twice the result with half the effort, which can express one's emotion or ideas appropriately by arousing people's memory of original idioms. For example:

Example (3) One non-linguistic explanation of failure at school is that “you can take a child to Euclid but you can't make him think” (JU, 2004, p. 39).

In this sentence, “you can take a child to Euclid but you can't make him think” is the nonce variant of “you can take a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink”.

Corresponding to the context of school education, this sentence not only enables people to realize the similarity between school education and “making him think”, but also highlights vividly the failure in school education in some places.

Three Major Types of Nonce Variants

Reversion

Reversion denotes the original metaphor in the idiom is reversed or inverted so as to create humorous effect. It is often used to create their own creative expressions. Examples are as follows:

Example (4) He turns out to be considerably less pessimistic than most writers whom we think of as “serious”, for whom “every silver lining has a cloud” (HUA, 1998, p. 36).

Example (5) They were contacted personally by telephone at their home by the New Zealand police minister, who promised “no stone would be left unturned” in the hunt for the killer (HUA, 1998, p. 36).

In these two examples, the metaphors in the original idioms “every cloud has a silver lining” and “leave no stone unturned” are reversed, resulting in the change in the meanings of the idioms. In the meantime, humor is created to catch the readers’ attention and appeal to their interest.

Substitution

Substitution refers to substituting or changing one or more of the components of an idiom for stylistic effect. Let’s look at the following examples:

Example (6) We thought our “cat” would be killed when he fell from the roof of the house. He was not, but he used up one of “his lives” (LUO, 2011, p. 15).

Example (7) He intended to take an opportunity this afternoon of speaking to Irene. “A word in time saves nine” (DUAN, 2001, p. 74).

Example (8) “Yes, you must take everything,” said Magdalen. “I’ll pay for the taxi if you like”. Now she was “as cool as a lettuce” (HUA, 1998, p. 37).

In these three examples, there are three idioms that are manipulated: “a cat has nine lives”, “a stitch in time saves nine”, and “as cool as a cucumber”. In all these instances, only an attempt has come into existence so as to make it more accurately proper to a specific situation by using suitable replacement; there is no change in meaning.

Modification

The modification of idioms is another common form of nonce variation, in which some adjectives, intensifiers, or evaluative and relative clauses are put in. This paper claims three kinds of treatment: semantically external modification, semantically internal modification, and conjunction modification. For semantically external modification, it is to indicate author’s viewpoint by modification. For instances:

Example (9) Mrs. Thatcher “came a political cropper” over Europe (Nicolas, 1995, p. 331).

Example (10) In the fifties, several big stars were “in the studio doghouses” because of their political affiliations (ZHANG, 2013, p. 198).

In example (9), the adjective “political” modifies the idiom “come a cropper” as a whole, not just the noun. It can be interpreted as “from a political point of view”. In example (10), “studio” can be interpreted as “from the studio”.

For the semantically internal treatment, it is to strengthen or diversify the literally lexical level, but it is thoroughly accountable at the metaphorical level, as in:

Example (11) Many people were anxious to “jump on the horse-drawn Reagan bandwagon” (Everaert, Linden, Schenk, & Schreuder, 1995, p. 296).

Example (12) It is very simple for those academics to look out of their “carpeted ivory towers” across the marsh of business depression (SHI, 2007, p. 41).

In these two examples, the inserted adjectives (horse-drawn and carpeted) are used to invigorate the metaphorical images of the original idioms. They either coordinate with the surface lexis or the meaning of the idioms.

Conjunction modification also changes the literally lexical level, but it cannot be undeviatingly construed at the metaphorical level, unless it is done for its pragmatic or stylistic effect. Examples are as follows:

Example (13) Bruce, a shark, found it a part he could really “sink his three rows of teeth into” (Everaert, Linden, Schenk, & Schreuder, 1995, p. 487).

Example (14) The fit of shame we feel at the end for having had such fun “pulling his cross-gartered leg for so long” (MU, 2000, p. 38).

In example (13), “the shark’s three rows of teeth” are literal. The idiom “sink one’s teeth into something” is irrelevant to the shark’s teeth either literally or metaphorically, so the two parts of the expression are explained individually as a combination. So is the case with example (14).

Distribution

On some occasions, an idiom can be segregated so that the component parts occur in two clauses. That is to dispense one idiom in different clauses. Examples are as follows:

Example (15) They are all snobs, even Julie who’s only ten years old. You never saw such “airs” as that child “gives herself” (Clarence & Robert, 1981, p. 147).

Example (16) I’ll acknowledge that my will is “iron”, but if you marry me I promise you that you’ll never feel anything but “the velvet glove” (LUO, 2011, p. 42).

In these two examples, the original idioms are separated by distribution. The two original idioms which are allotted two clauses respectively are “give oneself airs” and “an iron hand in the velvet glove”.

Conjunction of Different Idioms

Combining two different idioms into one particular usage also can be found in authentic language materials. It is logically more suitable to the particular context as in the following two cases.

Example (17) But it is hard to overstate the damage done by Mr. Clinton’s unwillingness to acknowledge “not all foreign-policy purposes are born equal” (The Economist, 1993, p. 343).

Example (18) “A Mars a day keeps you work, rest and play” (An advertisement for Mars chocolate).

In example (17), we can find the resemblances of these two idioms: “not all that glitters is gold” and “all men are created equal”. As a result, a thoroughly new expression is invented to conform to this particular context. In the same way, in example (18), two idioms “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” and “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” are combined to produce a new one to fabricate an impressive and engaging advertisement.

Since the nonce variation of an idiom is based on the original idiom, there must be some inherent connection between them. That is the motivation of these nonce usages of idioms.

Motivations of Nonce Variations

In the light of Hua (1998), motivations of nonce variations are classified into three kinds, which are semantic motivation, grammatical motivation, and phonological motivation.

Semantic Motivation

According to Hua (1998), semantic motivation refers to the case in which an idiom deflects the original in the light of its semantic meaning. This is a kind of mental association. In such a case, the two basic ways of semantic motivation are analogy and paraphrase.

Analogy on the basis of synonymy. With the help of this kind of analogy, new variants are established which have the same or similar meanings with the original idioms. An example is as follows:

Example (19) But could I? It was all “as clear as a mud-spattered windscreen” (Cowie & Mackin, 1975, p. 226).

In the example above, “as clear as a mud-spattered windscreen” is constructed out of the analogy with the original “as clear as mud”. In spite of their different metaphorical images, their basic meanings are completely of the same.

Analogy on the basis of oppositeness. The analogy on the basis of oppositeness selects one or more components of the idiom or even the whole idiom as the standpoint of opposition and creates a variant, which has an opposite meaning to the original. For example:

Example (20) I presume there have been worse planning decisions than Maplin Airport. There were several in Augustan Rome who thought that the simple construction of piers into the sea constituted an offence to Neptune which would surely be punished. Yet “Rome was not destroyed in a day” (Goldsworthy, 2009, p. 349).

Here, “Rome was not destroyed in a day” is made by analogy with the original form “Rome was not built in a day” according to the opposition of the meaning.

Analogy on the basis of quantity. In reality, this kind of analogy generally chooses the figure or number in the idiom as the point for analogy. Newly-invented phrases usually have no change in meaning. Let’s look at the following example:

Example (21) “But what do you know about Brother Golding? I could tell you a thing or three”, he said. “We were on the same Emergency Training what-have-you just after the War” (Golding, 1954).

The original idiom for “tell you a thing or three” is “tell someone a thing or two about something”. As a matter of fact, “three” and “two” have no difference in meaning in this case.

Analogy on the basis of space. Just as the name suggests, the analogy based on space has the lexis presenting the place and space as the point for analogy. Accordingly, new meaning is created. An example below will illustrate this:

Example (22) There is the plain speaker who tells his direct superior that the business he is having with his secretary is “the talk of the office” and that he had better be watchful (TV Times).

We can clearly see that, “the talk of the office” originates from the idiom “the talk of the town”, hence it is a typical analogy on the basis of space.

Analogy on the basis of color. In English, there are a lot of idioms which contain words denoting colors. Skillful language-users will make use of this. That is to say, they will make an analogy on the basis of color to

produce a complete new one. In such a case, the newly-made expression usually presents a completely different meaning from the original. The following is such an example:

Example (23) It became windier and colder. It may be a good joke when a teacher says: “You’ve got the thin blue line here all right” (DUAN, 2001, p. 73).

In the example above, “the thin blue line” is invented by emulating the original “the thin red line” with the help of analogy. Originally, “the thin red line” indicates the courageous resistance to or fight against a great number of enemies by only a small group of people, while “blue” in the created manner denotes the color of the teachers’ hands and faces in cold and wind.

Paraphrase. Paraphrase literally means expressing the same message in different words. As for the motivations of nonce variations, paraphrase is a way of using some other words to interpret the original idiom. Such an example is shown below:

Example (24) When my husband was back from work, he told me that he was “as tired as a dog” (MIU, 2006, p. 129).

In this example, “as tired as a dog” originates from the idiom “dog-tired”. As the case stands, this is a case of paraphrasing the original idiom.

Grammatical Motivation

With regard to grammatical motivation, it is a method through which language-users coin variants by way of grammatical change. In such cases, there are two common ways language-users usually use, which are conversion and derivation. As is often the case, the two ways merely bring about the change in grammatical form, but not the meaning. On a few occasions, however, both the grammatical form and the meaning of the newly-invented idioms differ from the original.

Example (25) Vince Cable, the personnel manager is talking about new “hiring-firing” rules with his boss (ZHU, 2006, p. 112).

Example (26) In those days, little Mary had a hard time of it. She would continually spend her life “hewing wood and drawing water” (JU, 2004, p. 39).

In these two examples, “hiring-firing”, a compound adjective, is derived from the verb phrase “hire and fire”, while “hewing wood and drawing water”, a participle phrase, is from the noun phrase “hewers of wood and drawers of water”. There is no change in meaning, but differences occur in grammatical form.

Phonological Motivation

As far as phonological motivation is concerned, it denotes that the alteration is made according to the pronunciation of a certain word in an idiom. The following are some examples:

Example (27) Hughie, who thinks nothing of sailing off on his own to Boulogne or even as “far afloat” as Oslo, ran aground in the Thames Estuary (Cowie & Mackin, 1975, p. 232).

Example (28) And with his talent for coming vividly alive in any human company, he will no doubt go on being popular. Whatever else he does he will surely “add to the gaiety of NATO” (LI, 2006, p. 65).

In example (27), “far afloat” is a variation from “far afield”. In example (28), “add to the gaiety of NATO” is from “add to the gaiety of nations”. Both of them are invented according to the pronunciation of some words in the idioms.

On some other occasions, the nonce variation of idioms may happen under the co-operation of several motivations. The following example shows us that the semantic motivation and grammatical motivation work at the same time:

Example (29) The lovers of power, the councilor, the footballer, the “treble-crossing” womanizer, and a thousand others are all here (CHEN, 2006, p. 32).

In this example, “treble-crossing” originates from “a double cross”, which means “cheating by pretended friendship”. With respect to the whole structure, it is different under grammatical motivation. Yet meanwhile, “treble” is obtained from “double” in the light of analogy on the basis of quantity.

Rhetorical Effects

Nonce variant of English idioms appears frequently in daily communication, news English, and literary works, etc. Every nonce variant reflects directly or indirectly everyday social life, corresponding to particular contexts. As long as it is used properly, it will contrive powerful rhetorical effects. Two kinds of rhetorical effects of nonce variant are shown in the following.

To Make the Sentence Vivid and Witty

Example (30) The motorist “glides on air”...but his speed undoes him (Kanfer, 1975, p. 65).

Example (31) “Where there is suffering, there is duty” (Bush, 2001).

In example (30), “glides on air” is manipulated from the original form “walk on air” (to be light-headed with happiness or feel elated). “Glide” is substituted for the word “walk” in the sentence. The replacement of one word makes the whole sentence more vivid and depicts lively the scene of the motorist who is beside himself with joy. Example (31) is extracted from the inaugural speech of American president W. Bush. The original form is “where there is will, there is a way or where there is life, and there is hope”.

To Make the Sentence Sarcastic and Humorous

Attention has been paid to lunchtime nourishment. But “the law moves in mysterious ways”, “its function to perform”, and the only people who can be sure of a square meal are the judge, jury, and prisoner. The original form of “the law moves in mysterious ways, its function to perform” is “God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform”. With enough wit and humor, the sentence satirizes sharply the law system of the society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the nonce variant of English idioms can be labeled as a special phenomenon. As a special phenomenon in English idiom variant, the nonce variant refers to the operation or utilization of an idiom, during which the form and/or meaning of the original idiom may be changed. It involves all the reformatory and rule-breaking operations of idioms. And at the same time we must be clear that it occurs only in certain contexts. In another way, English idiom variant, commonly seen in English, refers to the form of idiom created by means of altering some original components, structures, or meanings of the former idioms.

It goes without saying that, the nonce variant of English idioms reflects not only the changes on modern people’s thinking mode which motivate them to strive for changes, innovations, and practicality, but also the constant changes and development of the society. And on many occasions, it is necessary to produce a nonce variant so as to conform to the particular contexts. In this way, nonce variant not only reflects people’s state of

mind to seek novelty and difference, but also produces unique rhetorical effect together with sound communicative effect. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis on the causes of nonce variant, its types, and its function enables learners to be fully aware of the thinking modes and characteristics of idioms' renewal, and to comprehend the precise meanings and pragmatic functions of idiom variant. It is also significant in mastering and comprehending the developing rules of language.

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