

Glimpses on the History of Idiomaticity Issues

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The history of investigation of idioms and idiomaticity in general seems to be relatively short. It is the late 1980s and the 1990s that brought about results of great interest. However, is this period the history proper? The present article is meant to pay tribute also to some of those personalities who did not fail to deal with idiomaticity issues in the 1950s and still in the more remote periods. Brief comments upon their ideas and thoughts will, hopefully, make us believe in the importance of studies on idioms and kindred expressions: although sometimes ungrammatical and illogic, idioms are, indeed, ‘mental monuments of history’ and ‘sources of language change’.

1. Introduction

There is one issue that has been neglected in most earlier studies on idiomatology: namely, the history of investigation in this relatively new field. The present article is an attempt to make a repair and fill in the gap. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to provide a brief explanation with regard to the seeming shortcoming. First, readers seem to be usually more interested in the current state of matters rather than in the remote past; secondly, if potential readers are interested in history, they can make use of a fairly long list of sources and references compiled for further studies, a list which can be continuously extended and brought to date.¹ In passing, it is also worth remembering that the works that are now considered new and modern will appear to be ‘history’ in a few years’ time.

2. Understanding the term ‘idiomaticity’

The following issue seems a right candidate for the start: are we to deal with ‘a history of idiomatology, or idiomaticity, or idiomatics, or perhaps phraseology’? Actually, all these terms, and perhaps other labels, have been used to refer to one and the same area of the present scholarly interest. In some cases we know who was the first to employ the respective terms. This may not seem very important, but scholars usually express their arguments in order to promote their own and specific, let alone original, ways of understanding a given idea, and this **is** important - not only generally; it is important also for every investigator. What we have in mind is the issue of terminology. Scholars are expected to state precisely and unambiguously what they mean by the terms they choose when referring to the matters they discuss. Unfortunately, this requirement does not seem to be always observed. For instance, in this particular case **phraseology** as a term does not cover the vast domain of our interest since in common understanding it refers only to lexis. Teachers, as practitioners, may feel fairly satisfied, though: what they generally imagine is a list of ‘useful phrases’ for their pupils to learn by heart.

They may not realise the fact that idiomatic expressions are based on semantic rather than lexical grounds, or that the very term ‘phraseology’ is derived from the base-term ‘phrase’, which for modern linguists has connotations of reference primarily to grammatical structures.

As for the terms **idiomaticity** and **idiematology**, we can be content with the way of thinking about a parallel to some other expressions of an apparently identical morphological structure. We speak traditionally of ‘phonology’, ‘morphology’, ‘philology’, and so on. Therefore the term ‘idiematology’ makes us regard the discipline as a truly linguistic one, treated as a field of science proper, i.e. one that has its objectives (goals) to probe and also its own methods of investigation. Thus ‘idiomaticity’ (morphologically like ‘regularity’, ‘priority’, etc.) will refer to a ‘quality’ derived, in turn, from an attribution of, say, ‘constituting, or containing (an) idiom(s)’.²

Initially we could be happy with a view like that, but at once we feel that the explanation does not encompass everything that we would like to include. Certainly, idiomaticity does refer to quality; however, it does not necessarily need to imply that the idiomaticity of an expression depends on its containing of an idiom. A. D. Reichstein (1974), for instance, holds that the term idiomaticity is used for semantic and structural irregularity of phrasal idioms. Understanding the term in its broader sense, it can be said that an expression is ‘idiomatic’ (or, it has ‘proper idiomaticity’ if it is judged intuitively by native speakers as usual, natural, and commonly acceptable. In this respect one of fairly acceptable, and concise, definitions of ‘idiomaticity’ will be one that takes it as a **function of familiarity and frequency of use**.³

3. More recent history

3.1 Sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and psycholinguistic views in brief

When discussing the present issue, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language use need to be considered. In this context it is appropriate to mention **George W. Grace** as he was the first not only to introduce the term ‘idiematology’ but also to use it in the sense that coincides with our conviction that it shows principal features of a science; besides, Grace’s ‘idiematology’ can be considered synonymous, to a certain extent at least, with the generally accepted sense of ‘idiomaticity’. However, this view would objectively be too simplistic as it is, or hopefully could be, a discipline which incorporates all research in language use. This is a higher objective than Grace’s, indeed, although we must admit that his impressive list of conventionalised linguistic structures adds a lot to the goal. Yet Grace’s idiematology **is** scientific, namely in the sense (no matter whether we will agree or disagree) that he preferred to avoid unnecessary confusion of social factors, taking care of pure linguistic description. In Grace (1981; chapter 4) one can find taxonomy of number of unusual structures that are not normally accounted for in grammar and which are grouped under the label ‘idiematology’. Grace presents several types of idiematological phenomena that range from many kinds of seemingly arbitrary and unmotivated restrictions, via illogical and semantically anomalous forms, to grammatical exceptions, e.g. *fifty-cent cigar; by and large; I slept late; kick the bucket; didn’t you know that?*

The scholar who has probably done the most to systematise the field of Grace's idiomatology is **Andrew Pawley**, very often writing (in the 1980s) together with **Francis Syder**. In one of their articles they write to say that fluent and idiomatic control of performance in a language results, to a great extent, from the knowledge of a set of 'sentence stems' which are 'institutionalised' or 'lexicalised'. As a matter of fact, they understood the 'set' as a unit like a clause, or even one of a longer stretch, whose form and lexical content are fixed. Later they introduced the notion of **speech formula**, which meant a conventional link of a particular formal construction and a particular conventional idea. Let us notice here that the very term 'formula' is widely used by linguists in various subtle meanings and specifications; however, it seems to be a sort of cover term embracing what might simply be called an **idiomatic expression**. Thus, if understood correctly, in Pawley and Syder's view all genuine idioms are speech formulas, but not all speech formulas are idioms. In psycholinguistic terms, accepted by the two scholars, true idioms are such speech formulas that are **semantically non-compositional** and, to make their view complete, idioms are **syntactically non-conforming**. This opinion naturally obtains for the present paper. However, even if 'non-conformity' in syntax is understandable fairly well as the fact of the expression's grammatical peculiarity, 'non-compositionality' requires some comment. Undoubtedly, there may be idioms, which are at least partly compositional; yet this is another story.⁴

There are two or three things worth pointing out in connection with Grace, Pawley and Syder, and others. Let us note that while Grace tried to offer a serious, purely linguistic description of what is called here 'idiomatic expressions', Pawley and Syder zeroed in on that kind of language, which was required, and more or less rigidly set, by social convention. They strive to give answers to two points that any speaker should bother about, namely: (1) *what* can be said appropriately and (2) *how* it is to be said.⁵ Undoubtedly, the latter concerns form, the former reflects the pragmatic sense. With regard to the 'pragmatic' aspect at least two scholars should be mentioned. First, **Jürg Strässler** (1982), who chose the pragmatic route as an intermediate step in the then prevailing sociolinguistic direction; he defined the idiom as a functional element of language, namely, as a pragmatic phenomenon, i.e. something that is judged from the point of view of the language user. Second, **Florian Coulmas** (1979, 1981), the true representative of the sociolinguistic group, who worked on the concept of **routine formulas**; he evidently elaborated the idea of **routines** as proposed by D. Hymes (1974, 1975), W. Chafe (1968), and his other contemporaries. In a detailed study we would certainly find a lot of ideas shared by such linguists as **Uriel Weinreich** (1972), **Adam Makkai** (1972), even **Mikhail Bakhtin** (1986), **Dwight Bolinger** (1977), and others. Nevertheless, talking about Coulmas it is worth noting that in his opinion an adequate description of a community's sociolinguistic behaviour must include: (1) idiomaticity, (2) routine, and (3) collocability, which are considered to be significant properties of expression. Coulmas is convinced that every member of a speech community is able to distinguish routine utterances from idiosyncratic ones.

3.2 *On practical outcomes of idiomaticity issues*

It is believed that also practitioners can make use of the ideas offered by the scholars mentioned above and others. How do we understand the frequently used phrase 'to know a language'? Usually it is understood that to know a language means to have

mastered an adequate portion of the language's lexicon together with the grammatical rules which tell us how to combine pieces of lexicon (words?) into sentences. This opinion works well as it conforms to the ways our brains process language. They are not only algorithmic ways, i.e. operations repeated according to a few basic rules, but also heuristic ways, i.e. certain 'shortcuts' that are employed effectively when we make full use of our experience or former learning. (This complies with what Bolinger once said, namely, we use what we heard before.) In fact, methodologists speak of the use of **prefabricated language** in conversational routines, which makes discourse spontaneous, fluent, and really idiomatic. So Pawley's formulas can also be regarded as 'prefab parts'. Since idioms are just particular kinds of formulas, semantically and syntactically very often weird, to speak 'with proper idiomaticity' does not necessarily require the use of idioms, but it does require the use of formulas of various types.

Talking of the issue of what to know a language actually means, we should once more recall Pawley and Syder, who, in agreement with Chomsky, admit that with some lexicalised sentence stems significant systematisation is not possible. Addressing linguists they carry on to say:

For what really matters is not the economy of the description but its fit with what the native speaker knows of his language. If the native speaker knows certain linguistic forms in two ways, both as lexical units and as products of syntactic rules, then the grammarian is obliged to describe both kinds of knowledge; anything less would be incomplete (1983: 217).

Let us notice that this requirement was not observed by the original Chomskyan generative approach; only later did Chomsky's followers bring in semantic considerations.⁶

3.3 Tries in building up a theory

Although the present series of comments can hardly be complete,⁷ those who will be interested in adding new pieces of information can rely on certain facts. It would not be correct to speak of a theory or theories ever worked out, at least not in a rigorous sense of the word. This is fairly understandable since the field was tilled by scholars who did their best to accommodate the life of idioms to the respective linguistic trends. There was no true interest in idioms before the beginning of the 20th century, and then, structuralism, ruling in its various forms over the linguistic world, could hardly handle phenomena which appeared odd, exceptional, not fitting the patterns of grammar. The first to note that language employs a finite number of phenomena to produce an infinite number of sentences was probably Humboldt. Since then the idea came out on a rigid description of what was general, common, and perhaps even universal; and only after the description has been completed satisfactorily, it was claimed, would phenomena regarded as exceptional be added. Many linguists, among them such celebrities as Bloomfield, Harris, Martinet, Chomsky, Lyons, and many others, did not care very much about idioms. Nonetheless, there appeared hundreds of valuable contributions that dealt with idioms and similar expressions. Jespersen (1966) called them **formulas** to show that those tricky, exceptional expressions demanded a mental activity that was

different from that required in **free expressions**. Many scholars then employed the term ‘formula’ in the same or similar sense.

All in all, three main periods of idiom investigation can be distinguished. The first one was the very beginning of the 20th century; the next was in the 1950s, when the work in the field was resumed thanks to theoretical developments. The late 80s and the 90s brought about results of great interest, probably also owing to the scholars’ inclination to pragmatics and psycholinguistics. However, to date, this period is not history proper yet.

4. A more remote history

4.1 *True pioneers in the field*

In 1925 **Logan P. Smith** published a book entitled *Words and Idioms*, which was a collection of his essays. The longest one, called simply *English Idioms*, contains the greatest number of examples that Smith was able to gather, file and classify. It should be remarked that Smith was influenced by Jespersen, and that he worked within the then favourite tradition of etymology, apparently using lists of idioms that had been compiled mostly by others. Nevertheless, the extension is his, and the classification is indeed detailed and elaborate, encompassing every area of origin possible, be it sea, war, nature, farming, cattle, birds, etc. He informs us of idioms ‘from foreign sources’, he deals separately with idioms drawing on the Bible, as well as with Shakespeare’s own original idioms. Readers will receive additional information on some of the examples, very often fairly interesting.⁸ On the other hand Smith does not hesitate to admit that he is ignorant of a given etymology. By the way, many years before Smith, Dr. Samuel Johnson was a bit more conceited about his knowledge of etymologies and he disliked idioms as something that sullied language purity. Smith may not be a man of Johnson’s reputation, yet his simile is now worth remembering: “Idioms are like little sparks of life and energy in our speech.”

Another scholar of the former half of the past century should at least be mentioned: **Murat H. Roberts**, the author of *The Science of Idiom* (1944). Structuralists might accept his proposed polar relation between **discourse** and **language**, the categories “which are expected to conjoin in order to produce the complete sphere of communication” (1944: 299). Obviously enough, this relation is very close to the well-known dichotomy between content and meaning of an expression. In other words, recalling de Saussure’s view, Robert’s ‘language’ is the psychophysical mechanism, say, ‘langue’, which does the expressing through its dynamic aspect of utterance, namely, through ‘parole’. Nevertheless, what is Robert’s reasoning about idioms? The idiom belongs primarily to discourse, he claims, but since idiom has created language, it must have created grammar, which belongs primarily to ‘language’. Hence grammar is viewed as fossil idiom! It is a concept rather broadly conceived, indeed. Yet, what we may appreciate is the fact that all idioms are believed to originate as innovations of individuals and, using Robert’s words, each idiom is, as a matter of fact, “a mental monument of history” (ibid.: 304). Therefore we can also draw one challenging issue worth following: idioms can, or should (?), be studied as a source of language change!

4.2 Ideas on idiomaticity in the former Soviet Union

Special attention should be devoted to scholars who worked in the former Soviet Union. The so-called Western world was for decades unlucky in that many ideas of the Russian linguists did not reach us – for various reasons, of course, be it internal and external politics or the fact that they wrote mostly in Russian. Thus only with quite a delay did scholars in the West discover what certain ingenious brains propounded as early as in the 1920s. Among them, **Mikhail Bakhtin** had much to say in what was explored later on in pragmatics, semantics, and text linguistics. Concerning the present topic, Bakhtin's **speech genres** are of great importance. Nowadays we take his original ideas almost for granted, being trained in various sound courses in stylistics. Let us bear in mind, however, that Bakhtin opposed de Saussure's opinion in that he claimed that speech genres were simply given to community speakers rather than produced by them. Speech genres are considered relatively stable types of utterances, he claimed, and they belong to the respective community equally as do grammar and lexicon. Speech, i.e. everyday genres, is believed to be evidently lists of situations which call for the use of **formulaic language**, namely, language containing on its content level **formulas** as fixed expressions.⁹

Igor Mel'čuk (1960) is another personality of later years to be mentioned deservedly in the idiomatology history. He contributed to phraseological and lexicological studies by making a distinction between **idiomaticity** and **stability of collocation**. Briefly, he tried to find criteria for keeping genuine idioms and habitual collocations apart. In his opinion, idiomaticity is characterised by the uniqueness of subsense, a strong restriction on the selection of subsense of a given polysemous dictionary entry. On the other hand, in collocations the proposed restriction is only of a high degree given by context, and the stability is, in fact, probability with which the given constituent predicts the appearance of other constituents. Also **N. N. Amosova**¹⁰ (1963) describes what is called a **phraseological unit**, i.e. Mel'čuk's collocation, as any word that is only realised in a fixed context, employing the fairly new concept of **key-word** (e.g. the key-word *film* actualises the specific meaning of *blue*).

It should be added that only recently do we witness a comeback of the phraseology as spirited by Bakhtin. **Igor Anichkov** (1992) has gained reputation through what he calls **idiomatics**, the label which was to imply the independence of another linguistic discipline, besides phonetics, pragmatics, and semantics.

4.3 Working on idiomaticity issues in the US

Let us return to American linguists, who, as already pointed out, did only rarely take idioms and fixed phrases seriously enough. To be frank, only a few of them presented their observations in several different frameworks, but these are exceptions that could hardly make their works to integrate. Some of them were mentioned already, like those who were aware of the necessity of employing pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects to the basically formalistic description. I believe that their approach is very close to our common way of looking upon linguistic problems, namely, the functional approach in the tradition of the Prague School.

On the other hand, **Charles F. Hockett** was perhaps the first to offer a very formal definition of the concept of idiom. In his *A Course in Modern Linguistics* he writes:

[The idiom is...] “any Y in any occurrence in which it is not a constituent of a larger Y”, where Y is “any grammatical form whose meaning is not deducible from its structure” (1958: 172).

The consequences of this definition are fairly complex and far-reaching. Suffice it to notice that according to the definition even every morpheme must be granted idiomatic status because a morpheme has no structure from which we could tell its meaning. Hence, it must follow that idioms in Hockett’s view are not understood as multilexical units only, contrary to the way we regard them traditionally. The distinction between unilexical and multilexical units seems to be only arbitrary for Hockett, which teachers will appreciate, claiming that both simplex words as well as complex units, i.e. traditional idioms and kindred expressions, must be learnt separately. By the way, one of the psycholinguistic approaches of today would put it in the same way, only perhaps using its own terminology.¹¹

Unlike Hockett, **Yakov Malkiel** (1993) requires that idioms be only multilexical. His contribution in the field may seem to be of little importance at first sight because he examined only phrases that conventionally linked two items, appearing always in the same order, e.g. *spick and span*, *kith and kin*, *by and large*, etc.; they are called **binomials**. Yet the criterion of **irreversibility** he postulated is something that consequently sets a major problem for the approaches we know of as transformational-generative (TG). Briefly, any two items linked by the conjunction *and* can be swapped, i.e. they are expected to be reversible; yet certain multilexical units of this structure do not allow for reversibility!

4.3.1 *Generative grammar approach to idiomaticity*

As pointed out here above, TG advocates are generally believed not to have dealt with idiomatic expressions. A closer inspect into the work by some of them, however, makes us revise the opinion. **Yehoshua Bar-Hillel** (1955) foresaw the problems of idioms for the then fashionable machine translation. Yet he could not have known that something novel as TG would influence linguistics worldwide. Thus, frankly speaking, the first scholars to have dealt with idioms within the TG framework were **Jerrold J. Katz** and **Paul M. Postal** (1963). Two fairly novel proposals that they offered were (1) separation of the lexicon into two parts, namely lexical part and phrase-idiom part, and (2) criterion of non-compositionality. This is what we will probably take for granted nowadays. Their ideas were being elaborated by **Andras Balint** (1969) and many others, recently also by psycholinguists. What we must point out, however, is their distinguishing of **lexical idioms** and **phrase idioms**, the two types being defined on syntactic grounds. Basically, the former are syntactically dominated by one of the lowest syntactic (grammatical) categories, namely by noun, adjective, verb; while the latter, on the contrary, cannot be described like that. Suffice it to compare, e.g., *white lie* and *How do you do?*

The idea of the two types seems important for the reason that ‘idiomatic expressions’ can subsume such lexemes as clichés, compounds, or even phrasal verbs. Admittedly, some linguists exclude compounds altogether (e.g. Balint, who argues that

compounds are not phrases), while others treat compounds as minimal idiomatic expressions (Weinreich 1972, Makkai 1972), and still others do not seem to be quite certain about the issue and prefer to coin a category labelled **cross-cutting terms** (Sonomura 1996).

It is fair to say that he who did the most to refine Katz and Postal's tactics was **Uriel Weinreich** (1972). He assumed the view, at present also accepted generally, that an idiom is a complex expression, the meaning of which cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements. However, he developed a more truthful terminology, claiming that an idiom is a subset of a **phraseological unit**. At first sight (and, indeed, he began his considerations in this way), phraseological units have much to do with Katz and Postal's lexical part of the lexicon, and perhaps with their lexical idioms, too. Let us recall the fact of syntactic domination by one of the lowest syntactic category as, e.g., in *white lie*, *chew the fat* and compare this with Weinreich's understanding of what he calls phraseological unit. As he claims, a phraseological unit is an expression in which at least one constituent is polysemous; and, indeed, in *white lie*, for instance, *white* is polysemous in the intended terminological sense. Then, if Weinreich claims that an idiom is a subset of a phraseological unit, he is certainly right in postulating that such an idiom must be a unit where there are at least two polysemous constituents. And again, Weinreich's idioms seem to be Katz and Postal's phrase idioms. Nevertheless, his approach is certainly more subtle, and more elaborate too, although laid open to criticism. What we will appreciate very much is Weinreich's reference to context. In his definitions of the phraseological unit and its subset of idiom, respectively, he writes to say that in a phraseological unit a selection of subsense is determined by context and also that in an idiom there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses.¹² Although the work of context is, undoubtedly, decisive, we all will have experienced that in the case of idiomatic expressions the ambiguity is not always eliminated. Yet, what ambiguity, we may ask. Indeed, what Weinreich himself admits, arguing that ambiguity is something characteristic of genuine idioms, does not look all right. If he had in mind the literal and the non-literal (i.e. figurative) meaning, then quite a few multiword expressions might have both interpretations (or, readings) – yet they are called idioms.

The present contribution is meant to primarily offer a survey of history rather than to report personal views. Therefore, if some criticism is yet included, it presents notes and comments by Strässler (1982), Makkai (1972) and Čermák (1988), and the authors are left to deal and cope with what Weinreich left unsolved. Besides the issue of ambiguity it is what Strässler (1982: 32) mentions as Weinreich's 'putting the cart before the horse' when he [i.e. Weinreich] suggests that the idiomatic meaning is already one of the polysemous subsenses which we can select. We have to agree with the critics, at least in that to assign subsense can mostly be done only *ex post*. Speakers of English as a second language will understand that it is no big problem to remember and "retrieve" the meaning of an idiom only after it is known to them, not before.

Although provoking personal comment, Weinreich's work is a very significant contribution to idiomaticity studies within the current grammatical framework, which at his time demanded rigor and explicitness. In addition, his were the first valuable hints concerning (1) idiomaticity in terms of unproductive and semiproductive (syntactic) constructions, and (2) the aspect of familiarity of use [of idioms].

Other three personalities who deserve to be mentioned as TG advocates dealing with idiom issues are Fraser, McCawley and Newmeyer. It is probably true that **Bruce**

Fraser (1970) did not add much to the discussion, but we have to list his name all the same since he claimed to have discovered a hierarchy of transformational **frozensness** for phrase idioms. But did he really? **James D. McCawley (1973)** answered by offering a long list of counter-examples, but as far as their arguments are well understood, their approaches do not differ very much. Actually, they managed to show the cline-like character of idiomatic expressions, i.e. that idioms display degrees of frozensness, from almost completely unrestricted to completely frozen. Finally, **Frederick J. Newmeyer (1974)** illustrated the difficulties that we face when we try to incorporate idioms within the generative model. He concluded that if idioms were treated as units, which he had defined before, then those must be semantic units, not lexical ones. Right was **Wallace L. Chafe (1968)** when he claimed that idiomaticity could not be accounted for within that part of the Chomskyan paradigm that considered syntax to be central. He offered an alternative model, namely one in which semantics, rather than syntax, was initiative: the semantic component generates grammatical structures, he argues, and these structures are subject to conversion into phonetic structures. Chafe also lists four features of idioms that make them anomalies in the traditional TG paradigm: non-compositionality, transformational defectiveness, ungrammaticality, and frequency asymmetry.

Probably the last attempt to deal with idiomaticity within the TG framework (or rather 'generative grammar' framework?) was that proposed by **Ray Jackendoff (1997)**, **Charles Fillmore (and others) (1971, 1988)**. They offered a fairly broad definition of the idiom, which, in Fillmore's words, reads as follows: "...an idiomatic expression or construction is something a language user could fail to know while knowing everything else in the language" (1988: 504).

4.4 Less known approaches to idiomaticity

Advocates of approaches other than TG grammar also had a say in idiomaticity issues. Among them tagmemicists and stratificationalists should be mentioned justly. Andras Balint was mentioned already; included should also be prominent scholars like K. Pike, A. Healey, and A. Makkai.

Kenneth Pike (1967) called his phrasal unit a **hypermorpheme** and described it as a specific sequence of two or more specific morphemes. Thus what we normally refer to as 'idiomatic expression' must be a subset of the hypermorpheme.

Allan Healey (1968) excluded monomorphemic lexemes as idioms, yet both linguists understood idioms in the usual and generally accepted view, referring to an additional hypermorphemic (i.e. idiomatic) meaning which is not predictable from its constituent parts. What should not be forgotten, however, is Pike's incorporation of **cultural factors** into the linguistic theory. Indeed, idiomatic expressions do reflect respective people's culture.

Adam Makkai's (1972) ideas and opinions follow his stratificational view, and therefore it is rather difficult to integrate them to non-stratificational discussions. However, the data that he collected and most of his terminology on idiomaticity are a significant contribution. Let us notice, for example, his distinguishing of **lexemic idioms** and **sememic idioms**, which are said to be placed in two separate **idiomaticity areas** (i.e. strata, layers). Very briefly, an idiom is made up of more than one minimal free form, and then we have two different characteristics: (1) each **lexon** (i.e. component) can occur in other environments as the realisation of a monolexonic lexeme

– hence so-called lexemic idioms, e.g., *White House*, *blackbird*, and (2) the aggregate literal meaning as derived from the respective constituent lexemes works additionally as the realisation of a sememic network which is unpredictable – hence so-called sememic idioms, e.g. *chew the fat*. Another terminological invention is the distinction between the act of **encoding** and the act of **decoding**. The former can be illustrated by using proper prepositions: thus we do not say **with* but rather *at* in, e.g., *He drove...70 M.P.H.* Actually, Makkai prefers to speak of **phraseological peculiarities** here rather than of idioms. Genuine idioms are based on the act of decoding, and in his truly precise taxonomy these are of various types, such as **lexical clusters**, e.g. *red herring*; **turnures**, e.g., *fly off the handle*, etc. We could very well add that all idioms of decoding are simultaneously idioms of encoding, but not necessarily vice versa (Makkai, 1972: 25). Thus *hot potato*, for instance, in the sense ‘embarrassing issue’ is idiomatic from the semantic point of view (in terms of so-called sememic idioms), and it is also idiomatic as a peculiar phrase since we do not say **burning potato / hot chestnut*. On the other way around, it holds that not every act of encoding is idiomatic. According to Makkai, in every natural language there is a sort of middle style, that is to say neutral, devoid of either type of idiom (which, as is known, non-native English speakers are very fond of using).

To conclude it must be remembered that there is a view according to which everything in natural languages is idiomatic – based on encoding and decoding, from phonology through word-formation up to syntax and semantics, including also sayings, proverbs, even literature and culture. Hence this view would promote the study of idiomaticity as the Ultimate Science of all sciences, which is what some scholars propose. Do not let us exaggerate. Yet the study of idiomaticity, in a broader sense of the term, is worth the effort!

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Notes

¹ Some 400 titles can be found in Kavka (2003: 124 ff).

² This is a definition offered and accepted generally by most linguists interested in idiomatology.

³ This wording is after Sonomura (1996).

⁴ Based on a specific research, this issue is discussed in Kavka (2003: Chapter 5).

⁵ This is more explicitly explained in Fillmore, Kay and O'Conner (1988). See also later in this article.

⁶ With respect to idiomaticity, see the comments further in this article.

⁷ As a matter of fact, Sonomura's (1996) and Strässler's (1982) respective first chapters were the main and once richest sources for us to start working on this article in order to pay tribute to at least some of those who probed into idiomaticity issues. We apologize to those who did not get an honourable mention in this first, rather sketchy attempt.

⁸ For instance, *curry favour*, originally 'curry Favel', where 'curry' means 'to rub and clean a horse', here a horse of certain colour called 'favel' and being a symbol of cunning character.

⁹ More in Bakhtin's *The Problem of Speech Genres*. As we have failed to get a copy to quote from, we dare to paraphrase valuable comments by Sonomura, 1996: 32-34.

¹⁰ By the way, Amosova is believed to have emerged as the first significant critic of Vinogradov, who led the Soviet linguistics in the 1950s.

¹¹ Idioms are believed to be stored in the mental lexicon as **single lexical units**; other hypotheses work with **Direct Access Model** or **Dual Process Model**. For more information, see Kavka (2003, Chapter 5).

¹² Here references on Mel'čuk are fairly evident. See above in the article.

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