

Idiom

Definition of Idiom

The term *idiom* refers to a set expression or a phrase comprising two or more words. An interesting fact regarding the device is that the expression is not interpreted literally. The phrase is understood to mean something quite different from what individual words of the phrase would imply. Alternatively, it can be said that the phrase is interpreted in a figurative sense. Further, idioms vary in different cultures and countries.

Examples of Idiom in Literature

Example #1:

“Every cloud has its silver lining but it is sometimes a little difficult to get it to the mint.”

(By Don Marquis)

The statement quoted above uses “silver lining” as an idiom which means some auspicious moment is lurking behind the cloud or the difficult time.

Example #2:

“American idioms drive me up the wall!” (By [character](#) Ziva David, *NCIS* television series)

Here, the word “idioms” is used as an idiom.

Example #3:

“I worked the graveyard shift with old people, which was really demoralizing, because the old people didn’t have a chance in hell of ever getting out.” (By Kate Millett)

In the extract quoted above, “graveyard shift” is employed as an idiom.

Example #4:

Kirk: “If we play our cards right, we may be able to find out when those whales are being released.”

Spock: “How will playing cards help?”

([Dialogue](#) between characters Captain James T. Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, 1986)

Here, “if we play our cards right” means “if we avail our opportunities rightly.”

Example #5:

“Shakespeare is credited with coining more than 2,000 words, infusing thousands more existing ones with electrifying new meanings and forging idioms that would last for centuries. ‘A fool’s paradise,’ ‘at one fell swoop,’ ‘heart’s content,’ ‘in a pickle,’ ‘send him packing,’ ‘too much of a good thing,’ ‘the game is up,’ ‘good riddance,’ ‘love is blind,’ and ‘a sorry sight,’ to name a few.

(*Righting the Mother Tongue: From Olde English to Email, the Tangled Story of English Spelling*, by David Wolman)

This passage highlights the collection of idioms used by Shakespeare in his works. They are still used in everyday writing.

Example #6:

“Idioms vary in ‘transparency’: that is, whether their meaning can be derived from the literal meanings of the individual words. For example, make up [one’s] mind is rather transparent in suggesting the meaning ‘reach a decision,’ while kick the bucket is far from transparent in representing the meaning ‘die.’”

(*Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, by Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad, and Edward Finegan)

The extract quoted above explains that idioms vary in their degree of transparency, which is the extent to which an idiom reveals its true meaning varies.

Example #7:

“Modal idioms are idiosyncratic verbal formations which consist of more than one word and which have modal meanings that are not predictable from the constituent parts (compare the non-modal idioms kick the bucket). Under this heading we include have got [to], had better/best, would rather/sooner/as soon, and be [to].”

The extract quoted above highlights the use and significance of modal idioms.

Function of Idiom

Writers and public speakers use idioms generously. The purpose behind this vast use of idioms is to elaborate their language, to make it richer and spicier, and to help them in conveying subtle meanings to their intended [audience](#).

Not only do idioms help in making the language beautiful, they also make things better or worse through making the expression good or bad. For example, there are several idioms that convey the death of a person in highly subtle meanings, and some do the same in very offensive terms. They are also said to be exact and more correct than the literal words, and

writer make his sense clearer than it is, so that he could convey maximum meanings through minimum words and also keep the multiplicity of the meanings in the text intact.

It has also been seen that idioms not only convey subtle meanings, but also ideas not conveyed through normal and everyday language, and they keep the balance in the communication. Furthermore, they provide textual [coherence](#), so that the reader could be able to piece together a text that he has gone through and extract meanings the writer has conveyed.

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