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Inferentials: The Story of a Forgotten Evidential
Gerald Delahunty 1

Knowledge of Idiomaticity: Evidence from Idiom Calquing and Folk Literalization
Zili He 29

A Cyclic Approach to Simple Cliticization
Hunter Huckabay 42

On Japanese Causative: Review of Shibatani's Notion of Causative
Misaki Shimada 56

NP Predication and Full Saturation
Thomas Stroik 67

A Type of Reduplication in Turkish
Mübeccel Taneri 91

KNOWLEDGE OF IDIOMATICITY: Evidence from Idiom Calquing and Folk Literalization

Zili He

Abstract: To the synchronic linguistic analyst, an idiom is, by nature, semantically noncompositional. However, the language-user-in-culture may know (among other things) how the association between the nonliteral and the literal meanings of an idiom is culturally motivated. This paper looks at such cultural knowledge of idiomaticity, with evidence from IDIOM CALQUING--the literal borrowing of idioms across languages, and FOLK LITERALIZATION--the re-creation of literal meanings for idioms.

Introduction

A 'decoding' idiom (Makkai 1972) is commonly defined as a multimorphemic form which is noncompositional in meaning. Whether or not an expression is idiomatic is categorically determined by computation within the synchronic language system. The expression is mechanically segmented into its component morphemes; if the meanings of the parts do not constitute the meaning of the whole according to the general principles of syntax and semantics, the expression is declared noncompositional, hence idiomatic. Within the framework of a generative grammar, various attempts have been made to explain at what stage(s) of the derivation process, in what section(s) of the grammar machinery, and by what mechanism(s) of rules or constraints, the generation of an idiom in a sentence is fulfilled, with the intended nonliteral interpretation and the predicted transformational deficiencies (e.g. Katz & Postal 1963, Weinreich 1969, Fraser 1970, Katz 1973, Jackendoff 1975, Chomsky 1980, etc.). As for noncompositionality, it is usually held that 'no part of the idiom has retained any literal interpretation' (Fraser 1970:33), or that the idiom is necessarily ambiguous between its nonliteral and literal meanings, whose relation is arbitrary by definition (Weinreich 1969).

The above view of idiomaticity, which emphasizes the absence of semantic part-whole relation, is typically the view of a synchronic linguistic analyst. To her, the failure of systematic computation is signifi-

Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics, 1990, Vol. 15, no.1, pp.29-41

cant and decisive; other matters, such as cultural and historical knowledge, are of no concern at all. But from the standpoint of an ordinary language-user-in-culture, an expression is idiomatic not as the result of analysis or computation--she does not normally do such things intentionally. What does idiomaticity mean to her, then? Asked differently, what does she know when she knows that an expression is idiomatic? Intrigued by Makkai's (1972) idea of a category of 'cultural idioms', I have proposed a partial answer to such questions by developing the notion of 'cultural idiomaticity' (He 1989c:142, presented here in its narrower sense):

> [For the language user in the culture,] idiomaticity is fundamentally a matter of cultural awareness: (i) She knows that a given expression is a conventional (i.e. publicly recognized and frequently used) expression, which, with its nonliteral meaning, embodies an established, significant cultural concept; (ii) She knows how its nonliteral and literal meanings are culturally associated; (iii) She knows in what contexts of cultural experiences and with what cultural background knowledge the expression is understood and used.

The discussions in this paper pertain mainly to (ii) above, namely, the language user's knowledge concerning the culturally motivated nonliteral-literal association in idiomatic expressions. This sort of cultural knowledge of idiomaticity may reflect the genuine origin; it may be the product of popular folk etymology; or it may just be a sporadic invention for the nounce. To provide empirical evidence for such cultural awareness, two particular phenomena will be looked at: idiom calquing--the literal borrowing of *idioms across languages*, *and folk literalization*--the re-creation of literal meanings for idioms.

The Cultural Nonliteral-Literal Association

Chafe (1968) uses the term 'literalization' technically to talk about an idiom (a single semantic unit) being converted into a literal post-semantic arrangement, as part of the process of encoding meanings into sounds within the framework of generative semantics. While I am not concerned with a formal account of idiom generation, I have found his following observations particularly enlightening:

> ...speakers are quite aware, among other things, of literalizations and the relation between idioms and their literal counterparts. If this were not so, many puns would be impossible to create or appreciate, and literature would be a very different and much duller thing than it is. (p.124)
>
> ...the idiom 'bury-the-hatchet' has a meaning which is more transparently related to the meaning of its literal counterpart than is the case with 'kick-the-bucket'. We are apt to imagine the burial of a hatchet as an act symbolic of peace-making. (p.125)

My above stated idea of cultural idiomaticity is, in fact, an extension of Chafe's thoughts about the speakers' awareness of the relation between idioms and their literal counterparts, and about the transparency, in some cases, of this relation, as in "bury-the-hatchet". To repeat here for fuller consideration, I have argued that, for the language user, knowledge about idiomaticity is not based on linguistic analysis, but is essentially a matter of cultural awareness concerning (among other things) the nonliteral-literal association involved. Hence, THE MORE AWARE, THE MORE IDIOMATIC.

Let us consider the following three examples taken from Chinese, Russian, and English, respectively:

(1) huà shé tiān zú 画蛇添足 (draw snake add feet)

(2) V Tulu so svoim samovarom В Тулу со своим самоваром (to Tula with one's own samovar) [Tula--a place name in the Soviet Union; samovar--a metal urn used by Russians for heating water for making tea.]

(3) carry coals to Newcastle

If a language user has no knowledge whatsoever about their being conventional expressions with nonliteral meanings, she will naturally take them literally as ad hoc expressions (cf. Grace 1987). If she happens to find them listed side by side in a book of comparative Chinese-Russian-English idioms (without any cultural footnotes), then she knows that they are idioms, meaning more or less the same thing, namely, 'do something wholly unnecessary'. Knowing these idioms only in this way is, strictly speaking, no more than the memorization of pieces of special linguistic knowledge.

The knowledge of idiomaticity as such is lifeless, because it is cultureless.

In reality, I believe that the English version (3) should feel much more idiomatic than (1) or (2) to those readers of this paper who know, as a matter of cultural knowledge, that to carry coals to Newcastle is to do an unnecessary thing <u>because</u> Newcastle is a major coal center in England. For those who know this culturally, we can further say that the more abstract nonliteral content of the idiom ('doing something wholly unnecessary') is re-conceptualized in terms of the more concrete and imagerial literal content of the idiom ('carrying coals to Newcastle'), and that this specific nonliteral-literal association is conventionally established in the cultural conceptual system. It is precisely due to such cultural conceptual association, I contend, that the expression is taken by the language-user-in-culture to be idiomatic.

The nonliteral-literal association in the Chinese idiom (1) is highly familiar to most language users in the Chinese culture. It is based on a very popular historical story about a snake drawing contest, the rule being that the first contestant who finished drawing a snake would win a drink. In the story, the man who indeed first finished the snake was adding feet to it when the next man who finished the snake claimed the drink. Hence, 'to add feet to a snake' is to add something superfluous which actually ruins the effect--'to do something wholly unnecessary'.

The cultural knowledge involved in the idiomaticity of the Russian expression (2) is, <u>accidentally</u>, parallel to that involved in (3): Tula is famous for manufacturing samovars, thus 'going to Tula with one's own samovar' is 'doing something wholly unnecessary'. Without knowing this piece of Russian culture, can one conjecture the nonliteral-literal connection, say, on the basis of her knowledge about (3)? Yes, she probably can. If she takes what she guesses to be <u>the</u> association, we have a successful case of re-creating the nonliteral-literal association for an idiom. Then for her, (2) is idiomatic, culturally. However, a point I stressed earlier is crucial here: 'The more aware, the more idiomatic.' I would argue that with much cultural experiences and knowledge in relation to Tula, samovar, the Russian way of living, thinking and talking, etc., one can play with the idiomaticity of (2) creatively, for instance, by deliberately changing its literal make-up, altering its nonliteral meaning, applying it in unusual contexts, and so forth.

Idiomaticity, as a matter of cultural awareness, is, for the language-user-in-culture, truly something real and alive which can be brought into deliberate and creative use.

Idiom Calquing

As Crystal (1985:40) defines it, calquing is 'a type of borrowing, where the morphemic constituents of the borrowed word or phrase are translated item by item into equivalent morphemes in the new language.' If an idiom is necessarily non-compositional in the strictest sense that it has only a nonliteral meaning and that no part of it actually contributes to its interpretation (Fraser 1970), then for it to be borrowed from one language into another through calquing will be inconceivable (Makkai 1972).

Are all idioms genuinely noncompositional and therefore not subject to calquing? Kiparsky (1976) doubts it. He gives examples of "bury the hatchet" being borrowed into many European languages: "die Streitaxt begraben" (German), "begrava stridsyxan" (Swedish), "haudata sotakirves" (Finnish), etc., and remarks that 'such verbatim transfer would be inexplicable if they were treated as unanalyzable expressions whose parts had, in the phrases, no meanings of their own' (p.80).

I agree with Kiparsky and would further argue that idiomatic expressions whose nonliteral-literal associations are culturally motivated are, in principle, susceptible to calquing, on condition that the cultural knowledge involved is transmitted along with the expressions. This phenomenon, the literal borrowing of idioms across languages, I would call IDIOM CALQUING. Here are some examples of calqued idiomatic expressions in Chinese:

(4) *yī shí liǎng niǎo* 一石两鸟 (*one stone* two birds) from "to kill two birds with one stone" 'to achieve two aims with a single effort': the nonliteral-literal association is vividly transparent.

(5) è yú yǎn lèi 鳄鱼眼泪 (crocodile tears) from "crocodile tears" 'a hypocritical show of sorrow': this is based on an old belief that crocodiles wept while eating their preys.

(6) pī zhè yáng pí dè chái láng 披着羊皮的豺狼 (clothed-in sheep skin 's wolf) from

"a wolf in sheep's clothing" 'a dangerous, ruthless person who appears to be gentle and harmless': this is from one of Aesop's stories, in which a wolf in a sheep's skin succeeded in entering the field where sheep were kept.

(7) xuě nóng yú shuǐ 血浓于水 (blood thicker than water) from "blood is thicker than water" 'one should have more loyalty to people who are related to one than to other people': here the association is again quite obvious on the basis of our common knowledge about blood and water.

I have also found in English writings the following literal translations of Chinese idiomatic expressions (often accompanied by cultural footnotes):

(8) to be cowshedded: from guān niú péng 关牛棚 (be-locked-up-in cow shed) 'to be locked up in a guarded room and interrogated'; during the cultural revolution, those regarded as 'class enemies' were called niú-guǐ-shé-shén 牛鬼蛇神 (cow-ghost-snake-spirit), so the places where they were detained were called niú péng 牛棚 (cow shed).

(9) iron rice bowl: from tiě fàn wǎn 铁饭碗 (iron rice bowl)'a secure job in a state-run workplace'; such a job provides one with a permanent means of livelihood, just like a rice bowl made of iron, which will never be broken.

(10) one big pot: from dà guō fàn 大锅饭 (big pot-of rice) 'egalitarianism'; the food is cooked in a large pot, so that each person is treated the same way as everyone else.

The above examples of idiom calquing show that the literal meaning and the nonliteral-literal association of an idiom could be known to the language-user-in-culture and could be loaned across languages and cultures.

Folk Literalization

I contend that the language user may know the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression and how it is culturally associated with the nonliteral meaning. Such knowledge, however, may be a matter of what I

would call FOLK LITERALIZATION, which stems from her desire to make some sense of the 'literal' meaning of an idiom when the genuine cultural nonliteral-literal association is unknown or unclear. Let us start with an English example: "a flash in the pan" meaning 'a brief, intense effort that produces no really significant result'. By way of folk literalization, it is thought by some that the literal meaning refers to seeing something shiny when washing gravel in a pan searching for gold--but it really turns out to be nothing. The genuine connection, nevertheless, is as follows:

> This takes us back to the days of the flint-lock musket...[in which] sparks produced from a flint struck by a hammer ignited powder in a small depression or pan; this powder was the priming by which the charge was exploded. ...even when the operations worked well there was always the possibility that the priming or powder in the pan would merely burn harmlessly, just emitting a flash (Funk 1985:153-54).

The following is a pair of idiomatic compounds whose origin can be traced back to The Book of Songs, the earliest collection of Chinese poetry dating to the period between the eleventh and the sixth centuries B.C.:

(11) nòng zhāng 弄璋 (play-with scepter) 'give birth to a boy'

(12) nòng wǎ 弄瓦 (play-with spindle) 'give birth to a girl'

On the basis of a traditional view about the social role differentiation between men and women lie the original nonliteral-literal associations: Let the baby boy play with scepters, so that he will esteem virtue; let the baby girl play with spindles, so that she will get used to her future work.

What is of interest to us here is the folk literalization of (12) by some language users. The term wǎ 瓦 was used in ancient Chinese for anything made of fired clay. In this particular context it referred to the spindle, which was then made of fired clay. As a result of culture change, people in modern times are no longer acquainted with spindles, especially spindles made of fired clay, let alone the custom of using them as playthings for baby girls. Moreover, due to seman-

tic change, wǎ 瓦 has lost its general reference and is now used mainly to mean 'tiles'. Hence, no trace is left for the modern language user to see the original cultural nonliteral-literal association. By folk literalization, some language users take the literal meaning of (12) to be 'play with tiles'. That is indeed a reasonable re-creation because tiles are something valueless as compared to scepters, and so the essential element in the original nonliteral-literal association--having a girl is not as good as having a boy--is maintained. Some users further interpret nòng 弄 as 'make', and therefore take 'make a tile' for giving birth to a girl, in contrast with 'make a scepter' for giving birth to a boy.

The folk literalization of (12), nòng wǎ 弄瓦 , can even be found in some professional translations of The Book of Songs. For example, in Legge (1967:233), it is translated as 'their playthings tiles'; in Ya-ge Li (1981:246), 'they will have tiles to play with.' A translation which reflects the ancient customs is Waley's (1937:284): 'gives her a loom-whorl to play with.'

Let us look at another example of folk literalization:

(13) huí cháo 回潮 (re-turn moist)
'resurgence'

This idiomatic compound refers to the revival of old ideas, customs, or things. Its literal meaning spells the turning moist again of things having been sun- or fire-dried. Nevertheless, the word cháo潮 is also commonly known with the meaning 'tide' or 'trend'. Many language users, therefore, folk-literalize (13) as 'the returning tide'.

It will be a mistake to think that folk literalization of idiomatic expressions is illegitimate and, therefore, should not be taken seriously in the discussion of the language user's cultural knowledge of idiomaticity. On the contrary, I would suggest that, for the most part, such cultural knowledge might be FOLK in nature, for the ordinary language user is not an etymologist or a cultural historian. In my opinion, knowledge (about the nonliteral-literal association in an idiom) resulting from folk literalization, which is based on one's general cultural awareness, should be fully operative when put to conscious and creative use.

Folk Literalization in Loans

A special and interesting phenomenon of folk literalization can be seen in some loans in Chinese. A borrowed expression consisting of a sequence of nonsense foreign sounds can be regarded as idiomatic, just as Hockett (1958) and Conklin (1962) grant every morpheme idiomatic status on account of the fact that its meaning cannot be deduced from its structure. But when the nonsense syllables are given written shape in the form of Chinese characters, something literally intrepretable could accidentally result. Then we can say that such a borrowed expression has a 'literal' meaning as well as a nonliteral, idiomatic meaning. There is, in principle, no cultural association between the nonliteral and literal meanings for these terms, as shown by the examples below:

(14) yōu mò 幽默 from "humor": Literally, yōu 幽 means 'secluded', and mò 默 means 'quiet'. I have noticed that yōu mò 幽默 did occur in an ancient poem as a native free expression, meaning literally 'deep and quiet' (see Cihai 1948:486). But in modern Chinese it exists exclusively as the borrowed version of "humor", which has nothing at all to do with 'secluded and quiet' (see also Wu et al. 1936:785-86).

(15) mǎ lā sōng 马拉松 from "marathon": The three Chinese characters say 'a horse pulling a pine tree,' which does not allude to Pheidippides' run from Marathon to Athens to transmit news of the Greek victory over the Persians.

(16) fù ér hào shī 富而好施 from "full house" (a term in poker, referring to a hand containing three of a kind and a pair): The literal meaning is something like 'wealthy and generous,' which by no means relates to the nonliteral meaning.

However, where possible, an effort is quite often made to match borrowed nonsense syllables with sensible Chinese characters, so that the resulting expression could have a literal meaning that nicely associates with or even dramatically adds to the nonliteral meaning. Here are some fine examples:

(17) kǔ lì 苦力 from "coolie" (originally from Tamil "kuli", meaning 'hired servant'): Literally, kǔ 苦 means 'hard and bit-

ter', lì 力 means 'physical effort'. A vivid picture is depicted of a person doing heavy labor for little pay.

(18) liú lián 榴莲 from "durian" (fruit name in Malay, from "duri" 'thorn', the fruit having a hard prickly rind): Chinese in South East Asia sentimentally re-interpret the fruit name liú lián (written 榴梿) as the homophonous compound liú lián (written 留连) which means literally 'to be so attached (to a place) that one cannot bear to leave'. The cultural association lies in the fact that durian has a very strong smell that is notoriously offensive to outsiders, but to durian lovers it has the best flavor in the world--if one loves the fruit durian, he will love and linger about the land.

(19) pī tóu shì 披头士 from "the Beatles": The characters pī 披 'hang down over' and tóu 头 'head' form the literal meaning 'long hair hanging down on the head'. The term shì 士 is a classical word for 'person'. Through folk literalization the feature of the Beatles' hair style is captured.

(20) wéi tā mìng 维他命 from "vitamin": Literally, weí 维 is 'sustain', tā 他, 'his', and mìng 命, 'life'. Therefore, "vitamin" becomes '(something which) provides nourishment for one's life' in Chinese written form.

(21) kě kǒu kě lè 可口可乐 from "Coca Cola": The first kě 可 can be used as a verb in classical Chinese, which means 'be pleasant to'. The word kǒu 口 is 'mouth'. The second kě 可 functions like an affix, '-able', being attached to lè 乐 'enjoy'. Hence in Chinese, "Coca Cola" becomes literally 'tasty and enjoyable'.

(22) bǎi shì kě lè 百事可乐 from "Pepsi Cola": The character bǎi 百 means 'one hundred', a term that stands for the idea of 'all'. The word shì 事 means 'matters'. The whole expression says '(Drink Pepsi Cola, and) everything will be enjoyable'.

What is demonstrated in these examples, (17) to (22), is the practice to folk-literalize the nonsense components of a borrowed expression, in consideration of its nonliteral meaning, and thus to create a cultural nonliteral-literal association. Consequently, the borrowed expression becomes truly, i.e. culturally, idiomatic.

Summary

Part of what the language user knows about (at least some) idioms is how their nonliteral and literal meanings are culturally associated. Such knowledge of idiomaticity can be brought to consciousness and thus subject to investigation and description. Supporting evidence can be found in idiom calquing and folk literalization.

For the synchronic linguistic analyst, idiomaticity poses a serious challenge to the systematization of language. With the notion of cultural idiomaticity, taking the standpoint of the language user, many different and interesting things can be explored: the way knowledge of idiomaticity might be mentally represented; the possible organization of an important part of one's knowledge of culture in the form of knowledge of idiomaticity; the extraordinary communicative effectiveness and rhetorical power of the use of idioms; the conscious and deliberate manipulation of cultural knowledge in the creative uses of idioms, etc.

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