

International Intelligibility in World Englishes: Focusing on Idiomatic Expressions

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There are many new English varieties taking root in different cultures in the world. People now use their own English as a tool of international communication. The issue of international intelligibility has to be discussed from the viewpoint of an international perspective. For the purposes of teaching English to Japanese who use English as a foreign language, the idiomatic expressions of traditional Englishes and newborn English varieties are interesting, but pragmatically difficult to understand and use. Some approach to ease the difficulty with pragmatic usage of the idiomatic expressions should be investigated. This paper proposes a teaching and learning strategy to a semantic domain focusing on idiomatic expressions in order to secure an international intelligibility¹.

Nowadays, there are many varieties of English in the world. The concept that each variety has to be maintained is supported, because each variety is one of the symbols which show the identity of its speakers. However, if the differences among the varieties are increased it can be predicted that a discrepancy will occur in the mutual understanding among the speakers of English varieties. Latin was diversely changed into French, Italian, Spanish, and so on, then the mutual intelligibility between them vanished. It cannot be denied that English may follow the same path. An international intelligibility is a matter of importance in the discussion of World Englishes. The indication or discovery of common denominators and learning strategies which can be applied to bridge the diversity among English varieties in phonological, syntactic, and semantic domains can provide a contribution toward the establishment of increased international intelligibility. It is especially useful for English education in EIL² countries.

Preceding Proposals

Simplified Englishes

Several proposals for easy English communication were given in the past. *Basic English*, advocated by Charles Ogden in 1930, is one of the famous examples. He claimed that 850 English words were enough to describe almost all expressions used in daily life³. A particularity on his claim is that 18 verbs can cover most of the verbal expressions by using a combination of prepositions. Those idiomatic phrasal verbs are easily understood by English

¹ The idiomatic expressions in this paper include idioms, proverbs, metaphors, and metonymies

² EIL stands for English as an international language.

³ *Basic English* consists of verbs (18 words), nouns (600 words), adjectives (150 words), and others (100 words).

native speakers but they are one of the most difficult usages for non-native speakers. This is one of the reasons why Basic English did not gain wide acceptance. *Nuclear English*, proposed by Quirk in 1982, is a more recent proposal. According to an analysis of a few concrete usages in Nuclear English, because Quirk mainly presented its theoretical proposal, it can be inferred that Nuclear English is a kind of simplified English based on British Standard English. The usage that all tag-questions are represented by, “*Is it so?*” and a non-restrictive use of abbreviated relative clauses are included in his proposal. It can be said that the concept of both Basic English and Nuclear English are a simplification of a native English variety: British Standard English. Both simplified Englishes were not popularized because British Standard English tended not to take sensibility of non-native speakers into consideration, and non-native speakers felt that they were pressed into using an informal English because of their lack of sophistication as Yano (1990, p. 320) mentioned.

Proposals in World Englishes Basis

Some proposals are given from the viewpoint of World Englishes where English is placed as an international language and English varieties, not only ENL but also ESL and EFL, are taken into account. Gimson (1978) claimed that a number of phonemes in English decreased from 44 in RP English to 29 in his simplified English, for the purpose of offering an easy-to-use phonological system to non-native speakers. Contrary to Gimson’s deductive approach, Jenner (1997) indicated an inductive approach, claiming that a universal phonological system can be inductively extracted from a corpora of English varieties. In Hung (2002), the English educational strategy by which Singaporeans gain an international intelligibility in their phonetic skills is proposed, by drawing a contrast between RP English and General American. His proposal is interesting though it is limited to a particular English variety, Singaporean English. Jenkins (2003) expressed some questions about Jenner’s approach because his approach probably requires too much time and the extracted cores (common denominators) do not supposedly function well. Jenkins (2003) proposes making a so-called Lingua Franca Core by adapting both deductive and inductive methods (p. 128). If we are able to acquire this core and to know in what situations we can communicate or not, it is very linguistically helpful for English teaching. However, their proposals are now limited to the fields of phonology and lexicogrammar. It can be predicted that it is not easy to make a certain core or universality in all linguistic domains: phonology, syntax, and semantics. Especially, idiomatic expressions deep-rooted in various different cultures are difficult to comprehend, and they are recognized as obstacles to mutual intelligibility in communication.

Claims on Idiomatic Expressions

Suzuki (1985) claimed that when Japanese people use English as an international language it is better for them to avoid using idiomatic expressions based on English ethnicity in order to escape misunderstanding. Especially, communication among non-native speakers is the case (p. 158). His idea is reasonable to a certain extent, but communication by using a language aims at not only mechanical information exchange but also establishing a suitable human relationship between a speaker and a listener. In addition, the relation between a culture and a language is close, so it can be said that understanding idiomatic expressions

rooted in the speaker's culture produces smooth communication and a deep insight into the other's culture. In addition, it is actually difficult to distinguish the border between idiomatic expressions and those that are not.

Honna (2000) claimed that the idiomatic expressions of each English variety had to be admitted. He showed A and B example sentences and insisted that, "It would be illogical to turn down A sentences as incorrect because these are non-native-based. It would also be hard to accept that A sentences are incorrect while B sentences are correct simply because they are native-based" (p. 13):

- A. He has a wide face (is well known).
 He has a black belly (is roguish).
 He has a tall nose (is boastful).
 B. He has a bitter tongue.
 He has a sweet tooth.
 He has green fingers.

He also claimed that the difficulty in interpretation caused by idiomatic expressions could be solved by the introduction of language and cultural awareness and metaphorical training into school curriculums.

Honna's idea shows some potential, but it can be inferred that using many idiomatic expressions rooted in various cultural backgrounds can bring about substantial confusion in mutual intelligibility. As Honna claims, such confusion can be solved by correct understanding of every culture and accurate comprehension of all idiomatic expressions. However, it would be expected that English learners, even English teachers, would find this difficult because there are so many idiomatic expressions. It can thus be proposed that a certain strategy to use idiomatic expressions is necessary. If such a strategy is developed and introduced into English education, difficulty in handling idiomatic expressions may be comparatively solved.

Questionnaire

In order to seek such a strategy, a questionnaire was given to 175 Japanese college students⁴. It contains 12 English idiomatic expressions and the students first have to answer whether they already know each idiomatic expression or not. Then they are required to write down the equivalent meaning in Japanese. A sample of a question is the following:

- [sample question]
 Have you ever heard the following idiomatic expression?
He is out of his head. (yes no)
 Write down the meaning in Japanese. ()

The result of the questionnaire is as follows:

⁴ 175 informants consist of 95 students of Chukyo University and 80 students of Nanzan University.

Table 1. Percentage of Right Answers

		Right answers(%)	No. of right answers	No. of the known(RA)
1	Walls have ears.	76.7	134	43(39)
2	He shut his mouth.	75.6	132	21(18)
3	He works at a snail's pace.	59.4	104	4(4)
4	That's a piece of cake.	52.6	92	114(85)
5	He scratched his head.	48.0	84	5(1)
6	Money talks.	43.4	76	15(11)
7	She is a foxy girl.	9.1	16	10(4)
8	He pulled my leg.	7.4	13	51(10)
9	He stood the world on its head	1.7	3	4(0)
10	She takes anything he says with a pinch of salt.	1.1	2	1(0)
11	He kicked the bucket	0.6	1	5(1)
12	He always keeps his nose clean.	0	0	7(0)

Informants: 175 college students

Analyzing the Result of the Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic Expressions with High Percentage of Right Answers

Regarding the first idiomatic expression: *Walls have ears*, many students didn't know that this was an English idiomatic expression (only 24.6% knew), but 76.7 % of the students gave the right answer. The Japanese language has almost the same expression as the English one. Therefore, it can be guessed that they correctly answered because of the analogy of the Japanese counterpart. It can be said that this expression has a high transparency for transmitting the true meaning. The second: *He shut his mouth*, shows the same result as the first expression. This also has a similar Japanese counterpart. Therefore, it also has high transparency. The third: *He works at a snail's pace*, shows a high percentage of right answers. High transparency for this example is probably given by the snail's universal characteristic, which is slow movement, even though there is not a similar idiomatic expression in the Japanese language. These three idiomatic expressions can be categorized as Group A because they are easily understood without special instruction.

Idiomatic Expressions with a Moderate Percentage of Right Answers

The fifth idiomatic expression: *He scratched his head*, shows a moderate degree of semantic transparency. The Japanese language has a similar idiomatic expression to this expression, but the meaning is a little different. The Japanese counterpart means, "He felt a little embarrassed." The Japanese counterpart also has the same meaning as the English does, "He is in trouble," but it is not the primary meaning. The moderate transparency is caused by this semantic ambiguity of the Japanese counterpart. The sixth expression: *Money talks*, has

an interesting result. The author expected a high proportion of the right answer, because the Japanese language has a similar proverb. However, the results were short of expectations. This is caused by the abstract connotation which this proverb has. Some college students do not have enough ability of comprehension to understand this significant proverb. However, it can be said that the percentage of the right answers, 43.3%, shows that the Japanese counterpart has influenced the result.

The fourth expression: *That's a piece of cake*, indicates an unexpected result. The Japanese language does not have any similar idiomatic expression to this English expression and there's no universal characteristic like the third sentence. Therefore, the author hadn't expected a high proportion of the right answers. However, more than 65% of the students reported that they already knew this expression and the proportion of the right answers is comparatively high. At the time when the questionnaire was given, a TV commercial of a famous English school was broadcasted and this idiomatic expression was used in the commercial. It can be inferred that most of the informants watched the commercial and the idiomatic expression remained in their memories. This view is supported by two facts: that the proportion of the right answers given by the students who already knew this expression was 75%, and that almost all the students who reported that they had not encountered this idiomatic expression gave the wrong answers. It can be said that this case is an exception.

Two expressions, No. 5 and No. 6, can be categorized as Group B because they show a moderate transparency and are influenced by the semantic ambiguity of a Japanese counterpart. No. 4 cannot be included into this category because it is an exceptional case.

Idiomatic Expressions with a Low Percentage of Right Answers

Expressions 7-12 correspond to Group C because of low transparency, but they can be subcategorized into two groups.

Clustered wrong answers. The seventh idiomatic expression: *She is a foxy girl*, is a case of metaphoric usage. In Japan, a fox is thought to be a sly and cunning animal. It is even believed that it bewitches a human being. Most of the students gave similar wrong answers like, "She is a sly/cunning girl" or, "She is a liar" and so on. This misunderstanding leads to a great confusion in mutual communicability. It can be said that these kinds of idiomatic expressions have very low transparency. In other words, it is very opaque. The eighth one: *He pulled my leg*, is a very interesting case. Fifty-one students reported that they knew this expression, but only 10 students gave the right answer and more than 90% of the informants gave wrong answers. There is a similar expression in Japanese, but this similarity is only structural. The Japanese counterpart means: "He interrupted me (in doing something)," compared with the English counterpart, meaning: "He made fun of me." Therefore, it can be inferred that most of the wrong answers were probably due to this semantic gap. The ninth expression: *He stands the world on its head*, shows a similar tendency like the ones above. Almost the same structural expression exists in the Japanese language, but the meaning is different. The Japanese version means: "He is a leader of the world," instead of the English meaning: "He confused the world." This also shows a clustered wrong answer affected by the Japanese reading. It is probable that this expression also produces a considerable misunderstanding in mutual communication. These three idiomatic expressions can be

categorized as Group C-1 because they show a very low transparency and clustered wrong answers.

Various wrong answers. The last three idiomatic expressions: *He kicked the bucket*, *She takes anything he says with a pinch of salt*, and *He always keeps his nose clean*, are categorized as C-2. They are extremely difficult for Japanese to understand unless they are taught the meanings directly. This time, the informants were required to give an answer even though they did not understand the meaning. As a result, the respondents' answers were wrong and various. In an actual communication, when Japanese hear this kind of expression, they will ask the true meaning to the speaker. This means that misunderstanding like Group C-1 can be avoided. The fourth idiomatic expression: *That's a piece of cake*, would have been included in this group had it not been for the incidental TV broadcasting.

Teaching Strategy to Idiomatic Expressions

Transparency and Measures

The example set of idiomatic expressions can be divided into four groups based on the degree of transparency as seen in Table 2.

Idiomatic expressions in Group A indicate high transparency. The speaker of a different English variety—Japanese English this time—can analogize the true meaning without major difficulty because a linguistically and semantically similar expression exists in both English and Japanese, or there is a semantic universality. This kind of idiomatic expression will not interfere with mutual intelligibility in communication. Therefore, it is not necessary for English teachers to adopt measures from a pedagogical point of view.

Group B sentences are barely passable. This kind of idiomatic expression indicates moderate transparency caused by semantic gaps or semantic abstractness. Therefore, English teachers have to call students' attention to this kind of idiomatic expression to a certain extent and provide some educational measures.

The idiomatic expressions of Group C-1 are crucial because they superficially have false transparency. Most Japanese mistakenly apply direct translations into Japanese meanings. Therefore, explicit measures in English teaching are strongly required.

Group C-2 sentences have high opacity. When Japanese encounter this kind of expression, interruption or delay in communication occurs. Misunderstanding can only be avoided by negotiation between speakers. Mutual intelligibility can be maintained. It can be said that educational measures are not urgently needed. But if English teachers want to avoid interruption and delay in communication, they should teach their students the true meaning of these kinds of idiomatic expressions.

Necessity of pedagogical measures can be classified as seen in Table 3. Considering the information mentioned in Table 3, it can be suggested that the priority order for adopting measures is C-1, B, C-2, and A.

Table 2. Degree of Transparency

Group	Sentences	Transparency
A	1, 2, 3	high
B	5, 6	middle
C-1	7, 8, 9	low
C-2	(4), 10, 11, 12	low

Table 3. Necessity of Pedagogical Measures

Group	Transparency	Measure
A	high	not necessary
B	middle	necessary
C-1	low	strongly necessary
C-2	low	moderately necessary

Recognition and Attitude toward Idiomatic Expressions

The circumstance of this questionnaire is that Japanese college students are the informants and they are asked the meanings of idiomatic expressions in a native English variety. According to Honna's linguistic equality, the reverse situation is quite possible. It may be predicted that native English speakers are asked the meaning of idiomatic expressions deep-rooted in Japanese culture and given in Japanese English variety. This means that learning English varieties has to be reciprocal, and that by this type of learning, discrepancies in mutual communication can be reduced. This reciprocal combination should take place not only between ENL, ESL, and EFL, but also between all English varieties.

In addition, it can be said that the degree of difficulty of idiomatic expressions is affected by the degree of cultural similarity between two speakers. In the case when Japanese and Koreans communicate in English, it can be inferred that the mutual understanding of idiomatic expressions is easier than in the case when Japanese and Americans do, because of the high similarity between Japanese and Korean cultures. In any case, the mutual understanding of idiomatic expressions may be promoted by using the strategy mentioned above.

Conclusion

When English is used as an international language, each English variety produces many idiomatic expressions rooted in its own culture. It has to be admitted that idiomatic expressions rooted in every English variety should be equally treated as being legitimate as those in an Anglo-American English variety. However, the difficulty of understanding caused by the differences of various cultures requires a certain strategy for teaching idiomatic expressions from the viewpoint of international intelligibility. According to the result of this questionnaire, the idiomatic expressions can be divided into four groups based on semantic transparency. The idiomatic expressions of Group C-1, which have structural similarity and

semantic dissimilarity, clearly require adoption of some teaching measures. The Group B expressions, which have structural and partly semantic similarity, need teaching measures to some extent. The expressions of Group C-2, which do not have any similarity, do not need any measures even though an interruption or delay in communication occurs. The expressions of Group A, which have structural and semantic similarity, do not require measures to be adopted. It can be proposed that this strategy would be an effective clue to semantic understanding of idiomatic expressions. In addition to the strategy, cross-cultural understanding, language awareness, cultural awareness, metaphor training, and prototype semantics would be expected to support the understanding of idiomatic expressions. According to this approach, a Lingua Franca Core in the semantic domain would be gradually realized.

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