Idiom Variants Observed In Present-Day English: Systematic Or Creative?

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Abstract

Idiom variants (IVs) such as only the **peak** of the iceberg—opposed to the more standard only the **tip** of the iceberg—are essential to understanding how idioms, integral subjects of research in phraseology, are being used today. However, idioms are generally defined as word combinations whose holistic meanings cannot be deduced from the sum of their components and whose components cannot be replaced with other words. Studies have merely described IVs or discussed what components of IVs may be replaced with other words from a morphological perspective. Few studies have investigated the systematic or creative dispositions of IVs. I have incorporated corpus pattern analysis to fulfill the following objectives: (1) discuss the semantic features of IVs; (2) clarify how IVs expand semantically from their original idioms; (3) develop rules and processes involved in the conception of IVs; and (4) differentiate between idioms that do and do not transform IV. I found that idioms become IVs by following certain rules and processes. Notably, some IVs develop semantic and syntactic features that differ from those of an original idiom, whereas others share semantic and syntactic features with the original idiom despite the lexical replacements of the components of the original idiom. Semantically complex idioms never alter IVs. The results suggest that idioms systematically transform IVs and contribute to shaping the general understanding of phraseology.

1. Introduction

Linguistic activities comply with certain rules or theories, but linguistic phenomena beyond grammatical rules or theories are often observed. One phenomenon is idiom variants (IVs) such as find the ropes (derived from know/learn the ropes). Thus, what rules or theories trigger IVs?

Research on idioms has introduced IVs, which are semantically and morphologically different from original idioms. However, the research has not explained what and how a component in idioms changes into IVs because the firmly fixed research method and large-scale corpora have not fully revealed the actual manners of IVs. The reason for this situation is the wide recognition that idioms are morphologically and semantically invariable.

The bottom-up approach is possibly the best solution to elaborate on how IVs are formed because research on idioms has recently introduced IVs and regarded them as an irregular linguistic phenomenon beyond grammatical and linguistic rules. In this study, first, I search large-scale corpora for possible IVs. Next, I demonstrate the syntactic and semantic features of newly observed IVs and describe the rules of how IVs are formed from a morphological perspective.

English has a long history as a seafaring nation; thus, finding idioms used in the domain of the sea was easy. Additionally, many idioms are used in the domains of, for example, anger, card games, and gambling, which are unique in English. Thus, I focus on idioms in those three domains and attempt to account for a syntactic process of how idiom variants are formed and their morphological, syntactic, and semantic features. This study helps explain that idioms change by obeying certain rules, although idioms are widely known to be morphologically and semantically stable. In addition, one of the advantages of the bottom-up approach I adopted is that it elaborates notable linguistic phenomena that have been overlooked and cannot be explained by existing linguistic theories and rules.

The organization of this paper is as follows: Section 1 is the overview of the study. Section 2 defines phraseology and introduces the phraseological problems and research on idioms and idiom variants. Section 3 explains the research method and data used in the study. Section 4 is the main section of this study and discusses the rules of how idioms are changed. Section 5 proposes tentative rules for idiom variants. Section 6 provides the education and linguistic implications of this study. Finally, Section 7 summarizes the study and proposes topics for further research on idiom variants.

2. Phraseology

I define English phraseology as the study of repeatedly used phrases comprising at least two words. This definition includes word combinations such as idioms, collocations, phrasal verbs, proverbs (sayings), formulas, discourse particles, and fixed phrases. The umbrella term for such word combinations is phraseological units (PUs). Phraseme is another term for PUs. The two terms vary depending on the type of research conducted because the targeted word combinations differ. I define each word combination based on the following standards: frequency, polysemy, semantic transparency, and commonly used definitions of each word combination. However, this study does not fully explain the definitions of each word combination by comparing them with those in the literature.

Idioms such as spill the beans are not frequently used, and their meanings are not the sum of each component; therefore, idioms are not polysemous word combinations.

Collocations (e.g., look up a word in a dictionary and consult/*investigate a dictionary) range from high to low in frequency. In both cases, they are not polysemous and are semantically easily predictable from each component.

Phrasal verbs are word combinations comprising either a verb and an adverb or a verb, an adverb (optional), and a preposition. Although frequently used, phrasal verbs are not polysemous word combinations. Semantically, phrasal verbs are not always composed by the sum of each component. For example, look around, look up to, and put off are phrasal verbs.

Formulas—for example, now you're talking, Thank God/Goddess, it's Friday, and I wasn't born yesterday—appear in a conversation and do not have polysemy. Their frequencies differ by formula. Additionally, some formulas are semantically easy to understand, whereas others are not.

Proverbs (sayings) such as Better to ask the why than go astray are not the sum of each component from a semantic perspective. Proverbs are used in a limited context; therefore, they are neither frequently used nor polysemous word combinations.

Discourse particles have a high frequency when used in conversation, and they have polysemy. For example, discourse particles such as you know, I mean, and let's see have both a literal meaning and a pragmatic meaning, depending on the context. Conversely, discourse particles such as after all and and stuff like that are semantically difficult to understand because they are not the sum of each component and are not polysemous word combinations.

Inoue (2007) discusses fixed phrases, which are phrases with a high frequency and polysemy such as you know what, here we go (again), and let's say. Notably, some fixed phrases discussed in Inoue (2019), such as until before and until, are monosemous (i.e., an antonym of polysemous). The common characteristic of monosemous and polysemous fixed phrases is that they have been overlooked in the literature because they are formed beyond the explanations of theories and English grammatical rules.

Phraseology regards word combinations as the foundation of languages and as the medium intervening between words and sentences. The idea is from the repentance of existing English linguistic theories. These theories propose that individuals can generate an infinite number of sentences, which have not been constructed thus far, by putting together existing vocabularies with the help of English linguistic theories or grammatical rules. However, when I examined the utterances employed, they surprisingly contained many phrases that could not be explained by adhering to the English linguistic theories or grammatical rules. In other words, individuals subconsciously rely on phrases that they can speak at speed and write with Englishness. Second language acquisition (cf. Widdowson 1989), a research field in applied linguistics, has demonstrated that phrases enable smooth communication.

 Yagi and Inoue (2013) mention that English phraseology started at the beginning of the 20th century in Japan from an educational standpoint, English lexicography. It has evolved in English dictionaries for learners through trial and error (See detail in Yagi and Inoue 2013: 59ff.). Additionally, English phraseology from a linguistic standpoint started with Traité destilistique française, by Charles Bally, published in 1909 (See also Yagi and Inoue 2013: 75f. in detail). The two streams converge because of the advancement of computer corpora in the 1990s.
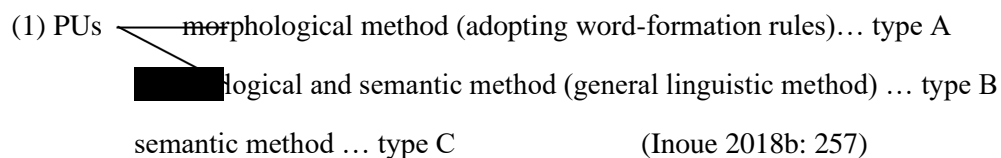
2.1. Problems to be fixed in English phraseology

According to my review of phraseological research, two problems need to be resolved in phraseology. The first problem is that the definitions of phraseology vary considerably because of a wide phraseological research area. The second problem, related to the first problem, is that judging whether a word combination is an established PU is difficult. Related to the second problem is that research on PUs, regarded as irregularities, has not been conducted. Namely, the research on idioms and fixed phrases could be improved. The reasons for the second problem are as follows. (i) Researchers have claimed that idioms remain unchanged; thus, studies on idioms have not been fully discussed. When looking up an idiom in a dictionary, standard explanations and descriptions can be observed. However, finding the variants of an idiom is easy. Inoue (2018a) discussed three variants, take care for, take care about, and care of, derived from a well-known idiom, take care of. (ii) For fixed phrases, no criteria are available to determine which word combinations belong to fixed phrases such as you know what, discussed in Inoue (2007), and until to and up until to (see Inoue (2011) in detail). Consequently, limited research on fixed phrases has been undertaken; thus, insufficient explanations are found in dictionaries.

To improve the situation, Inoue (2018b:257f.) provides a systematic framework by adopting a bottom-up approach, which explains the inner features of how a word combination becomes a PU, such as

formation, process, criteria, and stress pattern rules. Examples are shown in (1), (2), (3), and (4) (original is in Japanese).

How PUs are formed is shown in (1).

(1) PUs —— morphological method (adopting word-formation rules)… type A

█████logical and semantic method (general linguistic method) … type B

semantic method … type C   (Inoue 2018b: 257)

Notably, type B is an intermediary for types A and C. This discussion, including (1), demonstrates that PUs are formed not as linear constructions but as steric constructions. From the outcomes in (1), (2) summarizes the process of how a word combination becomes a PU.

(2) (i) two existing words are put together by adopting either (i) a morphological method, (ii) a
         morphological and semantic method, or (iii) a semantic method, which then become a
         repeatedly used unit

↓

   (ii) a PU has its own meaning and function through repeated use

         ↓ ← with the assistance from the lexicalisation of phrases

   (iii) the PU is established as an independent lexical item   (ibid.)

As (2) describes, first, PUs are formed through the combination of two existing words; this finding is the same as the Kenning used in Old English that shaped a word combination by using a specific method. Second, the PUs develop individual features through frequent use. With the assistance of phrasal lexicalization, one of the word-formation rules, a PU becomes an independent unit. These processes hold true for all PUs, continuous or discontinuous.

   Criteria to determine whether a word combination is a PU are defined in (3).

(3) a. frequency

   b. dispersion

   c. fixedness (i.e., no variables)

   d. consistency of existing words   (Inoue 2018b:258)

Frequency and dispersion (3a, b) are the norms indicating that PUs do not occur arbitrarily. Fixedness (3c) is the necessary condition that indicates that the fixed forms of PUs have widespread use in any

context or situation; thus, PUs are polysemic and multifunctional. In (3d), newly observed PUs are formed through a combination of existing words. If such combinations are not frequently and widely used, they are not PUs.

(4) shows the stress patterns of PUs.

(4) a. predicting the stress patterns of phrases simply by means of whether a word is a function word or a content word is impossible.

   b. the stress is placed on the word by which a speaker would like to convey the most important meaning of phrases.

   c. set phrases have stable stress patterns just as words do.

   d. a set phrase does not necessarily consist of one tone group and each word consisting of set phrases has each tone group.   (Inoue 2018b:5)

Of little importance is that irregularities, word combinations outside the scope of either grammatical rules or linguistic theories, can become a major focus for phraseology.

2.2. Research on idioms – problems and variants

As aforementioned, idioms, a subcategory in English phraseology, have been widely believed to be morphologically and semantically fixed word combinations; thus, few studies have investigated linguistic changes in idioms.

2.2.1. Idiomaticity

A scale of idiomaticity can be used to measure the level of an idiom. According to Moon (1998), idioms can be classified into high or low idiomaticity on the basis of three features: institutionalization, lexicogrammatical fixedness, and (semantic) non-compositionality. For example, idioms such as kick the bucket, call the shots, and kith and kin have high idiomaticity because they are conventionally and fixedly used and inferring the meanings from each component is difficult. On the other hand, idioms such as enough is enough and because of have low idiomaticity because the meanings are easy to understand despite their conventional and fixed use. Idioms can be classified into four types by idiomaticity: free combinations (e.g., open a window), restricted collocations (e.g., meet the demand), figurative idioms (e.g., call the shots), and pure idioms (e.g., spill the beans; Cowie 1999: 71). For details, see Cowie (ibid.).

Moon (1998: 8) mentions three other criteria: idioms (i) have single-word (often hyphenated) cognates as an orthographic criterion, such as break the ice, ice-breaker, and ice-breaking; (ii) typically stem from

syntactic or grammatical units (e.g., through thick and thin, which works as an adjunct; long in the tooth as a complement; a flash in the pan as a nominal group; and by and large as a sentence adverbial); and

(iii) have a phonological criterion in which the interword pauses and word durations are shorter than in word combinations.

2.2.2. Idiom variants

Research has introduced the types of idiom variants (cf. Cserép 2017a,b, Moon 1998); thus, few attempts have been undertaken to comprehensively study IVs. This section introduces the limited research on IVs in contemporary English and explains why IVs are observed.

2.2.2.1. Inoue (2018a)

Inoue (2018a) discusses that the variations of an idiom such as take care for, care about, and care of are formed through blending semantically similar idioms (take care of, look after, and care for, which have a high degree of idiomaticity) and described the evolution of such IVs, exemplified in (5) (italicized by the author).

(5) a. "You're supposed to select someone who will be good for the baby," Amy said. "Someone to look
       out for and take care for the baby. Not the other way around."   (COCA, 2014, FIC)

   b. During instruction, such values and related attitudes can be obtained if several conditions are
       established: building a community with members who take care about each other, using
    democratic rules when decisions have to be made,....   (COCA, 2005, ACAD)

   c. Tebow said. "And it would just be me and my mom at the house. So it was my responsibility
    until I was old enough to go (at age 15) to care of the cows, take care of the horses, take care of
     the chickens, take care of our garden, cut the grass."   (COCA, 2012, NW)

In addition, such variability is observed in spoken and written English; thus, it is not a minor error. Through the careful examination of the corpora by applying a diachronic analysis, it was established that each variation has been in use since the 1980s. The variations came to be used because of the blending of semantically similar idioms. In conclusion, the phenomenon discussed in Inoue (2018a) is rarely observed in the case of idioms, but it is necessary to understand that idioms are changing beyond the standards of fixedness and institutionalization.

Inoue (2018a) examines whether the three variants (take care for, take care about, and care of) can be

classified as idioms on the basis of the quantitative and qualitative findings in the prior sections and illustrates the differences among these three variants and the better-known idioms (i.e., take care of and care for). Table 1 summarizes the actual behavior of these three variants.

Table 1. Syntactic and semantic features of the new variant

variants	syntactic pattern	meaning	type
take care for	take care for + sb	take care of	type A
	take care for + sth	take responsibility for	type B
take care about	take care about + sb	take care of	type C
	take care about + sth	care about	type D
care of	care of + sb	take care of	type E
	care of + sb	care for, like	type F

How each variant is formed is shown in (6), (7), and (8): (6) is for take care for; (7), take care about; and (8), care for.

(6) a. type A

     take care of + sb   ~~care for + sb~~

          blending

       take care for + sb

   b. type B

     take responsibility for + sth   take care of + sth

          blending

        take care for + sth

(7) a PU take care ———— ~~care~~ about + sth

       blending, the merging of care as a noun and care as a

     verb take care about + sth – type D

       ↓ In addition to sth, sb is also placed after take care

     about take care about + sb – type C

(8) care for + sb ———— ~~take~~ care of + sb

      blending, the omission of take,

      the merging of care as a noun and care as a verb

     care of + sb – type E, F

Based on (6), (7), and (8), an assumption can be made that the three variants are formed from a blending of semantically similar common idioms and the merging of the verb and noun functions (i.e., care). These three variants also use both a word-formation rule (i.e., blending) and a semantic method (i.e., merging), as shown in (1). They fulfill process (i) in (2) but are not used often, as is shown in (3a); thus, they are at the formative stage of becoming an idiom.

To examine which stress patterns in (4) are applicable to the three variants, I asked native speakers of English (two Americans [i.e., from the United States], a Canadian, a Britain, an Australian) to read the passages that included take care for, take care about, and care of. The findings demonstrate that four of the seven informants pronounced take cáre for, take cáre about, and cáre of, with one informant replacing these three variants with take care of and care about. Notably, some informants paused for a beat between take care and for, take care, and about, or care and of because they were unfamiliar with the variants. Generally, however, the three variants had stable stress patterns and were regarded as variants of take care of and care about.

On the basis of the observations of the three variants, to assess whether these word combinations work as idioms, they fulfill the criteria outlined in Section 2.1. Therefore, Inoue (2018a) concluded that the three variants have become established as IVs and, therefore, are PU subcategories.

2.2.2.2. Inoue (2020)

Inoue (2020) introduces that one of the phrases with of-construction, on the face of it, alters the possessive on its face and explains why such lexical manipulation is observed by referring to the semantic and functional features of on its face by using CPA. Corpora have made it possible to reveal that on its face is semantically the same as on the face of it (i.e., seemingly) but that the meaning of face, namely, appearance, is more important than on the face of it because of end-focus. Additionally, on its face tends to co-occur with lexical items in the legal field such as constitutional, invalid, and lawful and be used in legal contexts. On its face stems from on the face of it because of not only the operation of end-focus but also the influence of semantically compatible phrases, for the sake of ~ and for ~'s sake, on behalf of ~, and on ~'s behalf. Notably, all phrases that have of-construction do not turn into genitive (e.g., for the life of me does not transform *for my life because *for my life is preferably interpreted as literal to the meaning of the phrase). The examples of on its face are shown in (9).

(9) a. The Anti-Riot Act, on the other hand, appears to be unconstitutional on its face, but has been

      challenged only a few times because it's so rarely used, he said.   (COCA, 2019, NEWS)

  b. …, a proposed Executive Order is lawful on its face and properly drafted. (COCA, 2017, MAG)

  c. He said the plan "seems absurd on its face."   (COCA, 2016, MAG)

The results of adopting CPA are as follows: on its face is not a mistakenly used PU owing to its high frequency and wide dispersion. On its face is most often used in the pattern [a copular verb + words related to law (e.g., unconstitutional, invalid) + on its face] in legal discourses. Other patterns, such as [a copular verb + a semantically negative word, e.g., absurd, bad + on its face] have also been observed. On its face in both patterns is used to mean it looks like, which is indistinguishable from on the face of it. The only difference in meaning is that the semantic focus moves to face in on its face from it in on the face of it; thus, the function of face (i.e., appearance) becomes stronger than on the face of it. The reason the phrase change occurs is because of the shift of semantic focus and the influence of the interactive usage of the phrase; other such examples are for the sake of ~ ⇄ for ~'s sake and on behalf of ~ ⇄ on ~'s behalf.

3. Research method and data

This paper surmises that there must be some rules or processes associated with IVs. CPA was adopted for this study, which is a procedure used in corpus linguistics that associates word meanings with word use by analyzing phraseological patterns and collocations. Pustejovsky et al. (2004) defines CPA as the meaning of a pattern that is expressed as a set of basic implicatures. For example, for the verb file, one pattern is [[Human = Plaintiff]] file [[Procedure = Lawsuit]], the implicature for which may be expressed as If you file a law suit, you are acting as the plaintiff, and you activate a procedure by which you hope to obtain redress for some wrong that you believe has been done to you. Depending on the application, the pattern implicature may be expressed in a wide variety of other ways, for example, as a translation into another language or as a synonym set such as "file = activate, start, begin, lodge."

This article investigated how IVs used in the domain of sailing, anger, and cards, which are poorly correlated, were established. First, a function called similar words in the Sketch Engine for language learning (SkeLL) was used to retrieve synonyms from the content words used in the original idioms. Second, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the British National Corpus (BNC), and WordBanksOnline (WB) were used to assess whether the IVs replaced with the synonyms from SkeLL were observed. Third, the IVs were clarified using CPA. Finally, the three essential features of idiomaticity, institutionalization, lexicogrammatical fixedness, and (semantic) non-compositionality, were used to judge the IVs idiomaticity. More importantly, criteria for determining whether a word combination is not created at random but established as an IV were defined as shown in (3).

The availability of large-sized computer corpora has provided new insights into phraseological research. To investigate the targeted IVs, COCA, BNC, and WB were consulted, with SkeLL being used to investigate the synonyms for the main components in the target idioms. COCA, BNC, and WB were

accessed daily from May 14 to 20, 2022. The data obtained from COCA in Section 5 show the register for which each example was used: ACAD denotes academic; FIC, fiction; MAG, magazine; WEB, website; SP, spoken; and WR, written.

4. IVs in contemporary English

4.1. In the domain of sailing

Learn the ropes is an idiom to explain that a speaker would like to autonomously learn tips to improve his/her performance (e.g., a job). Ropes are figuratively used in the idiom, and it is easily assumed that ropes cannot be replaced with synonyms[4]. In addition to roles, "autonomously" is the semantically key element in the idiom. MED[2] defines know/learn the ropes as "informal to know or learn how to do something, especially a job: It didn't take her new assistant long to learn the rope." LDCE[6] and OED similarly describe learn/know/understand the ropes and show someone the ropes. Based on the dictionaries' descriptions, our research question is as follows: Do know the ropes and learn the ropes semantically and syntactically behave the same? This section focuses on learn/know the ropes other than show someone the ropes[5] and clarifying their whole pictures.

4.1.1. Know the ropes, find the ropes

SkeLL shows understand, know, work, study, find, think, teach, do, see, try, and share as major synonyms of learn. I retrieved infinitives of understand, know, work, study, find, think, teach, do, see, try, and share the ropes as unmarked forms in the corpora. As examples (9) and (10) show, know the ropes and find the ropes are observed.

(9) a. You're a respected senior senator, and you know the ropes, you know your job extremely

well.   (COCA, 2019, FIC)

b. I am genuinely pissed off. I am a liberal democrat who was shaken to the core by 9/11. I was ready to back the administration in pursuit of those responsible. With 96 combat missions, 2 space flights, and retired CEO of a Defense Department think tank, I know the ropes and the risks.   (COCA, 2012, WEB)

c. These years are paramount in a child's future, and yes children hopefully by this time know the ropes and do need to learn to start making responsible decisions on their own, but the parents must still stay connected and enthusiastic even through the college years as your children's educational journey transitions.   (COCA, 2012, BLOG)

Know the ropes in (9) is used to say to "be thoroughly versed in something and acquire it in the light of various experiences"; hence, it is semantically different from learn the ropes. Know in know the ropes is used to mean "be familiar with something including advantages and disadvantages and master it" and shows that the cognitive status takes a step forward from learn. In addition, ropes in know the ropes signifies not tips but the entire picture of something, including merits and demerits. In other words, ropes in know the ropes semantically extends from ropes in learn the ropes. Consequently, know the ropes causes the semantic extension of learn the ropes and cognitively moves to a subsequent phase (i.e., be familiar with and acquire something including pros and cons). In addition, learn the ropes is not replaced with know the ropes, unlike dictionaries' descriptions.
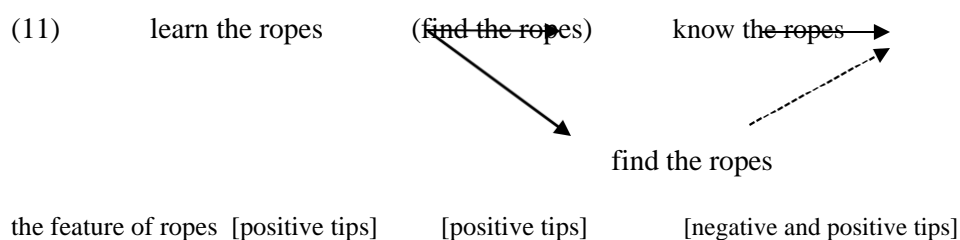
For example, the compliment You're a respected senior senator is located before know the ropes in (9a). Know the ropes in (9a) is used to express that you understands a whole picture of politics, and as it turned out, another compliment, your job extremely well, is used to say that you has a good influence on politics. Complements are not observed in learn the ropes (e.g., Under the medical school model, new teachers, after student teaching alongside veteran educators, and will remain at the school for three more years for more training while helping newer teachers learn the ropes. [COCA, 2018, NEWS]). In (9b), the speaker introduces his/her achievements (i.e., With 96 combat missions, 2 space flights, and retired CEO of a Defence Department think tank) before saying know the ropes; thus, the speaker uses know the ropes to mention that s/he understands everything related to defense very well. Know the ropes in (9c) is used to convey that the speaker sincerely hopes that children will come to know everything, including pros and cons, by a certain time and make the right decision.

(10) presents examples of find the ropes.

(10) a. Being a criminal was preferable to being a deadbeat like his own father, whom he last saw when he was around 5, he said. (Offset's first felony conviction, in 2012, was for possessing stolen property.) But he also maintained that his home life was not to blame for his wayward years. "That was me being a knucklehead, trying to find the ropes," he said. (COCA, 2018, NEWS)

b. The damage, though, was inflicted between the seventh and tenth overs which yielded only 12 runs against the spin of :PERSON: and :PERSON2: PERSON:, below, finished at better than a run a ball but struggled initially to find the ropes whether through lack of timing or a lack of power.   (WB, 2014, TIMES)

Find the ropes means "acquire tips in an effort" because expressions such as trying to and struggled typically co-occur with find the ropes. In other words, find the ropes is used to say that a speaker voluntarily attempts to acquire tips with an effort but is not sure if s/he can obtain tips in the end and whether s/he can help to improve his/her performance in something related to a job. In summary, find the ropes is derived from learn the ropes, but whether find the ropes eventually becomes know the ropes is unpredictable.

The semantic relationship among learn the ropes, know the ropes, and find the ropes is represented graphically in (11).

(11)   learn the ropes   (~~find the ropes~~)   know th~~e ropes~~ →

                                                    find the ropes

the feature of ropes [positive tips]   [positive tips]   [negative and positive tips]

First, find the ropes is derived from learn the ropes. Next, find the ropes makes a transition to know the ropes under a certain condition that a speaker autonomously acquires tips in an effort, is familiar with them, and tends to pass them on to a society or an institution. If the speaker does not fulfill the condition, s/he ends up with find the ropes and cannot reach the final phase (i.e., know the ropes). Additionally, the original idiom and the two IVs are independently established and not merged into one idiom. The distinctive features of each expression are shown in (12).

(12) a. learn the ropes: [+ autonomously], [+ gain positive tips], [± be good at work, etc.]

   b. find the ropes: [+ autonomously], [+ in an effort], [+ gain positive tips], [± be good at work, etc.]

   c. know the ropes: [+ autonomously], [+ in an effort], [+ experienced], [+ gain negative and positive tips], [+ be good at work, etc.]

4.1.2. Clear the decks

Clear the decks is used to mean "to get rid of everything that is not needed or to deal with everything that needs be done so that you can start doing something more important." (e.g., The Government has cleared the decks for an early general election.) (MED[2]). Decks has a figurative meaning; thus, clear might be replaced with a word.

4.1.2.1. Keep the decks clear/cleared, clear the floor

SkeLL makes cover, set, have, put, pass, close, keep, and remove bigger and closer to clear than other words that are similar to clear. Floor, roof, door, window, wall, and room are prominently shown as synonyms with decks in SkeLL. Expressions such as *cover/*set/*have/*put/*pass/*close/*keep/*remove the decks, which replace clear with similar words, are not observed in the corpora. However, the expression keep the decks cleared/clear, shown in (13), is observed.

(13) a. You feel that your life is becoming over-crowded with bits of trivia so from today you'll make up your mind to keep the decks cleared, not just at home or at work, but in your mind too.

(WB, 2015, The Sun)

b. She understands why it's important to put one toy away before getting out another and, between us, we manage to keep the decks remarkably clear compared with the homes of other

children.   (WB, 2009, Times)

Keep the decks clear/cleared is used to mean "properly prepare one's mind or a place for something." The decks in (13a) shows home, work, and mind in the context, and the decks in (13b) shows homes; hence, the decks is figuratively used. Keep the decks clear/cleared is composed by the blending of a familiar pattern keep something clear/cleared and the idiom clear the decks.

No variants that lexically replace clear with semantically similar words are retrieved in the corpora. However, clear the floor shown in (14), which is thought to be established by the lexical replacement the decks with the floor, is observed.

(14) a. Show some love! I can't hear you! You ready, girl? Always. Yes, baby? Without Elektra? Mm-hmm. Silence! Clear the floor, children. Clear the floor. We've got ourselves a challenge on this

evening.   (COCA, 2018, Drama)

b. All NEST officials clear the floor. We have 10 minutes until attempted contact. We've taken possession of the five devices that were hidden in the ship with Sentinel Prime.

(COCA, 2011, Movie)

c. You ready, America? - One minute. - All right, move a little to your left. - Hey, video... – That's good. - you done with the test patterns? - Camera one. - Okay, clear the floor, folks.   (COCA, 1994, Movie)

An expression such as You ready? is used to ask if a listener/speaker properly prepares for something that exists around clear the floor in (14a, c). Clear the floor in (14b) is used to say, "we prepare for attempted contact during 10 minutes." Additionally, clear the floor tends to be used as an imperative form in spoken English.

Why is floor an alternative to decks? There are two answers to this questions: (a) floor is a synonym for decks, as SkeLL shows, and (b) floor is easier to understand and to use than decks because the former is a more familiar word than the latter. In summary, clear the floor is a variant due to the lexical replacement of a figuratively used component with a more familiar word. Additionally, clear the floor does not cause semantic extension to impose the figurative meaning of the decks on the floor. Clear the floor is mainly used in spoken English because, as aforementioned, it is easier to understand the whole meaning of an expression (i.e., clear the floor) than clear the decks because floor is more common than decks.

4.1.3 (Be) in the same boat

(Be) in the same boat (as somebody) means "to be in the same unpleasant situation as someone else" (e.g., Everyone has lost their job. We're all in the same boat.) (LDCE[6]). Boat is figuratively used as a situation or a fate and is a semantically key component in the idiom. The semantically major distinctive feature of (be) in the same boat is [+ unpleasant].

4.1.3.1 (Be) in the same ship/vehicle/car

Data obtained from the corpora revealed that (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car is observed as the semantic alternative of (be) in the same boat, shown in (15).

(15) a. As long as representatives keep bringing money to their district, working solely for that district, and representing that district only... the people there will vote for them. Until voters as a whole look at the big picture and become willing to vote out their beloved congressman, we'll be in the same ship we are today.   (COCA, 2012, BLOG)

b. I hope the couple of examples in this post illustrate the value of providing your customers with another place to reach out to you, engage in conversations and solve problems. Acceptance of the

short term discomfort of having problems aired online is well worth the rewards of satisfied

customers sharing positive experiences with others in the same vehicle. (COCA, 2012, BLOG)

c. I didn't say anything for a moment, remembering all the nasty things my father had said about

Negroes, even though he never had any dealings with them beyond harvest time when he was selling

the crop, and then he complained about everyone short-shifting him, so I figured they were no worse

than anyone else. I hadn't met a bad person on a train yet. They were all together like in the same car,

usually all looking for work, and didn't nobody need to be beat down more than they

already was.   (COCA, 2017, FIC)

On the basis of the context in which be in the same ship in (15a) is used, ship does not always have the original distinctive feature, namely, [+ unpleasant], but has a neutral feature, [± unpleasant]. On the other hand, in the same vehicle and in the same car are used to merely say "to be in the same situation"; thus, vehicle and car do not have the distinctive feature, namely, [- unpleasant]. It can be deduced from (15) that (be) in the same boat changes its meaning into the ones that do not always have the distinctive feature, [± unpleasant], and lose the distinctive feature, [- unpleasant]. In the latter case, the semantically key component word (i.e., boat) is replaced by a word that is not relevant to sailing. The diagram in (16) illustrates the aforementioned discussion.

(16) a key component replaced by a word about sailing   a key component replaced by a word unrelated to sailing

(be) in the same boat → (be) in the same ship   → (be) in the same vehicle/car

+ unpleasant   ± unpleasant   - unpleasant

4.1.3.2. Degree of PUs and idiomaticity

(Be) in the same ship/vehicle/car is less frequently used than the original idiom but follows the formation, process, and criteria of how a word combination becomes a PU, explained in (1), (2), and (3) in 2.1. Additionally, (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car fulfills the criteria of idiomaticity shown in 2.2.1; thus, (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car is established as an IV, and they have high idiomaticity because they are conventionally and fixedly used and inferring the meanings from each component is difficult. However, understanding the features of (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car might be difficult to because understanding the features of the original idiom is necessary and the whole pictures of (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car are not clarified. In a sense, (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car might have a higher degree of idiomaticity than (be) in the same boat does.

4.2. In the domain of anger

4.2.1. Keep/hold one's temper (in check)→ keep/hold one's anger (in check)

Keep/hold one's temper (in check) refers to the ability to "stay calm when it would be easy to get angry" (LDCE[6]), as the examples in (17) show. The word temper used in the idiom has a figurative meaning similar to anger because SkeLL found the synonyms temperament, disposition, and anger for temper. However, keep/hold one's temper (in check) has a distinctive feature, [+controllable anger], based on the definition, that is, to keep control of one's temper/anger).

The corpora data revealed that, as shown in (17), keep/hold one's anger (in check), temper can be replaced with anger without causing any semantic extension from the original idiom.

(17) a. My doctors can't predict if my sense of smell will ever return because it involves nerve

regeneration, a field they know little about. They have said that if it hasn't come back yet, it

probably never will. I try to keep my anger and bitterness locked away in a trunk and pushed

back into a corner of the attic where I won't trip on it every time I open the door.

<div align="center">(COCA, 2012, Blog)</div>

b. Last week I just barely -- barely -- managed to keep from lashing out and walking away, but

somehow I managed to keep my anger in check.   (COCA, 2012, Blog)

c. Fortunately, I didn't lash out; I knew:PERSON: wouldn't have. I knew God wanted me to keep my

anger under control.   (WB, 2000, WR)

d. When you feel that you can't hold your anger in any longer, here are some great strategies to try.

<div align="right">(WB, 2013, The Sun)</div>

To keep/hold one's anger (in check) is easier to understand than the original idiom because anger has a higher frequency than temper, although both words are labeled W3, that is, words in the 2000–3000 frequency range in written English, and are classified as the second most important 3000 words of the 9000 words used in LDCE[6]. Therefore, when temper is replaced with a semantically downgraded word, that is, anger, keep/hold one's anger (in check) maintains the distinctive feature [+ controllable anger] of the original idiom. Keep/hold one's anger (in check) fulfills the first two features of idiomaticity described in 2.2.1, institutionalization and lexicogrammatical fixedness. However, it does not always fulfill the third feature, (semantic) non-compositionality, because it is easy to semantically deduce the whole meaning from each component, which means that keep/hold one's anger (in check) is an established IV with a lower idiomaticity than the original idiom.

4.2.2. Incur one's wrath → incur/earn/deserve one's wrath/anger/ire/fury

The original idiom incur one's wrath means to make someone extremely angry. Unlike the other idioms discussed in this paper, this idiom does not have any figurative components, that is, incur one's wrath has low idiomaticity. The variants incur one's anger, earn one's wrath/ire, and deserve one's wrath/fury/anger were also found in the corpora, exemplified in (18).

(18) a. GEORGE WILL: Sir, you are said to be quite angry about Congressman Jim Leach of Iowa,
     who's taken the lead on the Republican side in this. What has he done to incur your anger?

(COCA, 1994, SP)

   b. Show us the Straight Path. The path of those who incur Your favor. Not the path of those who earn
      your wrath. Nor of those who go astray.   (COCA, 2009, FIC)

   c. You are experiencing the world, my dear. Mastering languages, meeting influential people… You
   parked me with anyone who would take me, because you can't stand me. - Oh… - What have I done
                  to earn your ire? You're spouting nonsense! Please don't send me away
      again.   (COCA, 2014, TV)

   d. Why are you doing this? What have we done to deserve your wrath? (COCA, 2018, Movie)

   e. So… who wants to go first? I'll start. I've been hideous. I know that, and… I deserve your fury.
      I've been conceited… selfish. Well, an asshole, basically.   (COCA, 2018, Movie)

   f. "Take it easy, Daphne. It's not that he doesn't deserve your anger, or that karma would object to a
      little vengeance against him. But if you lost your temper completely, well…"

(COCA, 2009, FIC)

As shown in (18), incur one's anger in (18a) is semantically the same as the original idiom because the anger in incur one's anger indicates the extreme anger that wrath also implies because the sentence you are said to be quite angry about~ is mentioned. Wrath is replaced with a familiar, semantically downgraded word. Because the frequency of wrath is higher than that of anger, anger is labeled as W3 (which shows words in the 2000–3000 frequency range in written English in LDCE[6]), which means that the meaning of to incur one's anger is easier to understand than that of incur one's wrath. Second, earn one's wrath/ire in (18b, c) is used to say that the person has a quality that makes the other deserve anger because of something unpleasant that has been done. In other words, the two components of the original idiom can be replaced with other words, such as earn one's wrath/ire, which is a newly formed variant that results in a semantic extension of the original idiom. Third, the deserve one's wrath/fury/anger used in (18d, e, f) means that the person deserves the anger and might be punished because of their behavior. The examples in (19) further exemplify the semantic features of deserve one's wrath/anger.

(19) a. Join with me while I put words into your mouths, and speak them on your behalf–"Lord, I am

     guilty. I deserve your wrath. …."   (WB, N/A, WR)

   b. It could even be that your parents let you down when you were young. Now you punish those

     who don't deserve your anger.   (WB, 2014, The Sun)

Similar to earn one's wrath/ire, deserve one's wrath/fury/anger results in a semantic extension.

(20) shows the meaning of the original idiom and its variants. Notably, one's in the original and the variants was changed into you to clarify the meaning. Table 2 summarizes the features of incur one's wrath and its variants.

(20) a. incur your wrath: make you extremely angry as the result of something someone has done

   b. incur your anger: make you extremely angry as the result of something someone has done

   c. earn your wrath/ire: you have a quality that makes you deserve the anger because someone has
        done something unpleasant

   d. deserve your wrath/fury/anger: it is right that someone is angry at you and might punish you
        because of the way you have behaved

(20) shows that incur your wrath/anger and earn your wrath/ire are used in an active sense because you becomes angry; on the other hand, deserve your wrath/fury/anger is used in a passive sense because it is someone who becomes (quite) angry.

Table 2. Features of incur one's wrath and its variants

	consequences of anger	sign of remorse	idiomaticity
incur one's wrath	− earn punishment	no	low
incur one's anger	− earn punishment	no	low
earn one's wrath/ire	− earn punishment	no	lower
deserve one's wrath/fury/anger	+ earn punishment	yes	lower

Idioms with low idiomaticity, such as incur one's wrath, can therefore replace a component with a semantically similar word without resulting in a semantic extension (i.e., incur one's anger) or can replace the two components with other words and result in semantic extension (i.e., earn one's ire, deserve one's fury/anger). Each variant fulfills (3) and has an idiomaticity feature, as explained in 2.2.1, with incur one's anger, earn one's wrath/ire, and deserve one's wrath/fury/anger being established as IVs with low idiomaticity.

4.3. In the domain of card games

The PUs the cards/odds are (always) stacked against somebody and the deck is stacked against. (used for saying that someone will probably fail and be in an adverse situation or position) can be used as the rules/laws are stacked against somebody, whose semantic major component of the PU changes but whose meaning does not cause semantic extension.

4.3.1 Be/get dealt a bad hand → be/get dealt a bad card

The original idiom be/get dealt a bad hand is used to mean that somebody is in unfavorable circumstances due to something somebody cannot control. Hand is figuratively used and derived from card games in the idiom. Moreover, it is the semantically major component; thus, it is difficult to imagine that hand could be replaced with another word. However, in (21), the IV be/get dealt a bad card is observed to not cause any semantic change from the original idiom.

> (21) a. Though they'd been raised by the same parents in exactly the same way, she nevertheless believed that Gretchen had been dealt a bad card. Henry knew this and thought it was rubbish.   (COCA, 2019, FIC)
>
> b. The cause of the disease, known for a century, has never been found. "Why me?" Wootten asked. "You got dealt a bad card," he was told.   (COCA, 1996, News)
>
> c. Given that Camiller intended to remodel the entire building, he was surprised not to find more enthusiasm but admits that "the scheme isn't bad. I was just dealt a bad card."
>
> (WB, 2006, News)
>
> d. My father died of a heart attack when he was 61, probably due to high cholesterol. It seems I inherited his affliction. In theory, I'm guilt-free, and have simply been dealt a bad card. But I do feel guilty, because, when I smoked in my twenties, I was raising my cholesterol levels.
>
> (WB, 2007, News)

The IV be/get dealt a bad card is formed by replacing hand into a semantically downgraded or familiar word, card. This finding helps clarify that the IV is related to the domain of card games and that understanding its meaning is difficult.

An idiom with high idiomaticity can therefore replace a component with a semantically downgraded word into an IV with low idiomaticity, causing no semantic extension (i.e., be/get dealt a bad card). The IV has low idiomaticity features, as explained in 2.2.1.

4.3.2. Play the hand one's dealt → play the cards one's dealt

Notably, data obtained from the corpora demonstrated that the IV play the cards one's dealt appears more repeatedly than the original idiom play the hand one's dealt (used to say to make use of a current situation or circumstance which somebody is afforded or has available), as shown in (22). The hand in the original idiom is figuratively used as a situation or circumstance and is the semantically major component.

(22) a. Things like this tell us that Mr. Obama is a victim of the Peter Principle, and a second term will not make it any better for him or for us. Has anyone stopped to consider her audience? She's talking to the people who are supposed to be SUPPORTING her husband. It's perfectly fine to tell members of your own team that you need to quit whining and play the cards you're dealt. If she was talking to all America, I'd agree it would be arrogant.   (COCA, 2012, Blog)

b. He fractured his left shoulder in the opener and sat out the next 11 games. He returned for the final games, despite the bone not being fully healed. "You've got to play the cards you're dealt and for me personally getting hurt early in the year was not part of my plan," he said.

(COCA, 2017, News)

c. The view is that audiences still need the help of a channel - the C4 mantra, he says, is "editor of choice, arbiter of taste" – rather than buy shows direct from the producer, but Mr :PERSON: hints that C4 could do with owning a production arm. "There's not a major broadcaster that doesn't have production, although we can play the cards we are dealt." (WB, 2006, News)

d. None more so than the place where he's at now -LSB- Portsmouth -RSB-. He's really dragged them up and they are a big force to be reckoned with now. He's done a fantastic job. "You've got the play the cards that you are dealt, in a way."   (WB, 2008, News)

Same as IV be/get dealt a bad card, the IV play the cards one's dealt is formed by the replacement of the semantically major component, hand, into the semantically easy-to-understand or downgraded word, cards. Moreover, the IV does not cause any semantic extension from the original idiom. Hence, the IV enables a more rapid understanding of its whole meaning than the original idiom does.

5. Tentative processes for IVs

The IV research discussed in Inoue (2018a, 2020) and the results in Section 4 reveal that IVs are formed because of two contributing factors: a semantic factor and a lexical factor.

IVs discussed in Inoue (2018a, 2020) (i.e., take care for, take care about, care of, and on its face) and this article (i.e., keep the decks clear/cleared, etc.) are formed because of semantic contributing factors (i.e., blending and analogy). Some IVs cause semantic extension from the original idioms. I refer to IVs formed due to semantic contributing factors as type A. Type A has the following two processes: (i) blending of existing PUs (some IVs eventually have their own meanings, but some IVs do not) and (ii) analogy of other PUs (IVs do not cause semantic extension).

IVs discussed in the article (e.g., know the ropes, find the ropes, clear the floor, and (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car, be/get dealt a bad card, play the cards one's dealt) are formed because of the lexical contributing factor. I refer to the IV, which formed because of the replacements of a figuratively used component (i.e., replaced by synonymous and more easy-to-understand components) without causing semantic change to the original idioms, as type B. Type B IVs can be subdivided into types B1 and B2 by the lexical variation in idioms.

Type B1 comprises IVs formed because of the replacements of a figuratively used component without causing semantic change to the original idioms (e.g., clear the floor, be/get dealt a bad card, play the cards one's dealt). In this type, semantically easy-to-understand synonyms are an alternative to a figuratively used component, namely, the semantic downgrade of a figuratively used component. Type B1 has the following process: lexical replacement of a component with a synonym (IVs cause semantic extension), shown in Process C in (23). Type B2 comprises IVs that replaced a figuratively used component with a semantically downgraded word (i.e., easy to understand, more familiar), causing the loss of a distinctive feature (e.g., (be) in the same ship/vehicle/car, etc.). Type B2 IVs have the following process: lexical replacement of a figuratively used component with a semantically downgraded word (in some cases, IVs become semantically transparent), shown in Process D in (23). The IVs classified into type B have a lower degree of idiomaticity than the original idiom.

The tentative processes to form IVs are shown in (23). Rules A and B are due to semantic contributing factors; Rules C and D are due to lexical contributing factors.

(23) Process A: Blending of existing PU (some IVs eventually have their own meanings, but some IVs do not)

  Process B: Analogy of other PUs (IVs do not cause semantic extension)

    Process C: Lexical replacement of a component with a synonym (IVs cause semantic extension)

Process D: Lexical replacement of a figuratively used component with a semantically downgraded

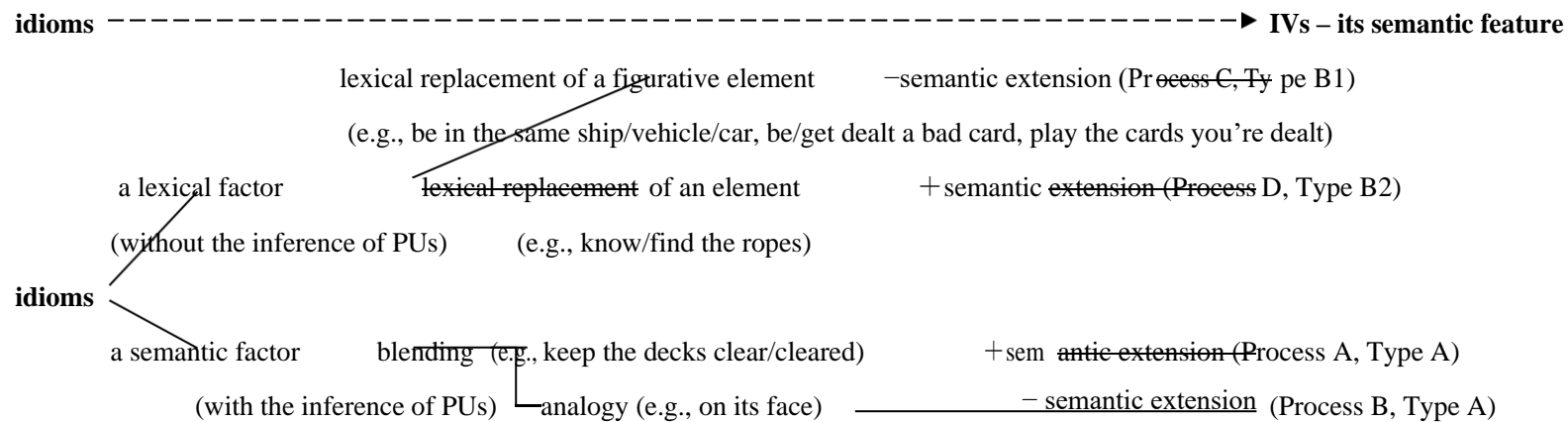word (in some cases, IVs become semantically transparent)

idioms ---▶ **IVs – its semantic feature**

lexical replacement of a figurative element   −semantic extension (Process C, Type B1)

(e.g., be in the same ship/vehicle/car, be/get dealt a bad card, play the cards you're dealt)

a lexical factor   ~~lexical replacement~~ of an element   ＋semantic ~~extension (Process~~ D, Type B2)

(without the inference of PUs)   (e.g., know/find the ropes)

idioms

a semantic factor   blending (e.g., keep the decks clear/cleared)   ＋sem ~~antic extension (~~Process A, Type A)

(with the inference of PUs) ⎩analogy (e.g., on its face)   − semantic extension (Process B, Type A)

Figure 1. Tentative processes for the formation of IVs

6. Implication for other research fields

The outcome of the study is useful for the application of English lexicography. English PUs were first described in English dictionaries for learners and have been polished there because of proactive ingenuity. This study returns to the basic focus on English phraseology and makes it possible to systematically and comprehensively describe the cutting-edge and actual manners of idioms, namely, IVs in English dictionaries and English-Japanese dictionaries for learners. The fields of English phraseology and English lexicography are advancing their association has weakened; thus, this study helps connect the two research fields. The phraseological results revealed in this study enable English learners to understand a few linguistic phenomena, explained by linguistic theories and grammatical rules, and demonstrate new linguistic phenomena, enabled by certain rules.

7. Conclusion

This article has descriptively explained subconsciously used tentative principles that help form IVs and has demonstrated that idioms can be lexically and semantically altered not arbitrarily but by obeying certain rules. The findings obtained from this article are widely applicable to idioms used in other domains, such as anger, and made it possible to fix rules on how IVs are formed. Additionally, the results might help systematically explain IVs when unfamiliar idiomatic word combinations are observed. Research on IVs from a linguistic perspective advances English phraseology.

Acknowledgment

Dictionaries

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