**How to Use Idioms**

The academic writing is mainly based on the literal meaning of words and phrases. Standard language constructions make it possible to establish a formal logic and convey the intended meaning to be understood in the same way by most readers. The use of a specific terminology in a given field of study would reduce even further the number of most frequently used words. The single interpretation of a sentence formed with the formal language is needed to provide a systematic description of the subject of scientific investigation. The proper selection of relevant terms and definitions is a must for a scholarly publication.

On the contrary, the casual language often relies on idiomatic and colloquial expressions. Metaphors and allegories added to the plain language would allow one to express opinions indirectly. In arts, the textual content is open for interpretation and the most inspirational writings have different layers of realization depending on the reader’s background.

In science, however, the precision in expressing oneself does matter. Here Halliday (1993) can be quoted as saying: “Whatever the focus, of course, there will always be mixed or borderline cases; but by and large 'scientific English' is a recognizable category, and any speaker of English for whom it falls within the domain of experience knows it when he sees it.”

The general recommendation is that one should preferably avoid idioms in technical communications. An idiom is defined as (McArthur 1992): “an expression, word, or phrase that has a figurative meaning that is comprehended in regard to a common use of that expression that is separate from the literal meaning or definition of the words of which it is made.”

The question is: Is it possible to make a strict distinction between formal and casual language? The English dictionaries list varieties of meanings for most words (depending on the context). In some cases, when the reader:
- does not have a technical background;
- is not familiar with the use of a term in a specific technical direction;
- is a non-native speaker;
the content may seem as being written with the use of unknown idioms or idiomatic expressions. For example, the terms:
  - world wide web (www);
  - web data mining;
  - text mining;
  - data warehousing;
  - semantic web;
  - hyperlink;
may appear as idioms to someone being not familiar with information and communications technologies (ICT) and the Internet. There are many common words which enter the technical terminology due to the new associations needed to be made with technological advances never seen before. Also, hybrid technical words are created by combining the roots of several words and adding prefixes and suffixes. In addition, the mutual utilization of words from other languages, taxonomy terms, abbreviations, technical slang and jargon contribute to the complexity of academic texts.

The mathematical sections of a paper, which rely on axiomatic foundations and require strict proofs of lemmas and theorems, must be written without idiomatic expressions. Other non-analytical sections, which intend to make an overview of existing studies, describe experimental or computational set-ups, analyze, compare and discuss the obtained results, etc., should also be written in the most simple and concise way possible. A technical paper is supposed to be read and understood by the majority of readers, who could eventually apply the acquired information to their own studies.

* By Dobri Atanassov Batovski, Deputy Editor, AU J.T.

*(Continued on inside back cover)*
Nevertheless, idioms and idiomatic expressions could possibly be used in some specific cases. Scholars sometimes tend to use a cliché if it seems to be universally accepted, for example:

- thinking outside the box;
- the elephant in the room;
- to cut a long story short;
- the tip of the iceberg;
- in the blink of an eye;
- it does not hold water;
- black and white;
- make a point;
- state of the art;
- cutting edge;
- tunnel vision;
- the state of the art;
- déjà vu, etc.

It can even be argued that the concept of totally avoiding idioms appears to be just an extreme limitation which could render the writing pedantic and lexically limited.

The title of a paper could include idiomatic expressions, metaphors, allegories or rhetorical questions to capture the attention of the public. For instance, the title (Liszka et al. 1997)

“Problems with comparing interconnection networks: Is an alligator better than an armadillo?”

gives a hint about the limitations of existing interconnection networks.

Idioms could be useful when:
- seem to be the shortest way of expressing a more complicated idea; or
- the literal meaning might not make sense.

Machauf (1990) considered “three main discourse functions: description, prescription and persuasion.” in journal articles (civil engineering). Persuasion is the function involving colloquial language.

In summary, idioms and idiomatic expressions should be limited in technical communications. However, occasional inclusion of colloquial language to emphasize some aspects of the study might be acceptable on a case-by-case basis.

The formation of an idiom represents a holistic approach in giving a new meaning to the synergy of standard words and the classification of a text construction as an idiom depends on the level of logical abstraction. Understanding idioms is an important ability of the human brain. A proverb which is used often in psychological tests

“A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

would be given the literal interpretation

“If you roll a stone down a hill, it won't pick up any moss.”

by a person having difficulties thinking in abstract categories.

Note: The technical study of idioms is useful in speech and text recognition, machine translation, intelligent systems, robotics and artificial intelligence. There are also software idioms which are routinely used in programming languages and software tools, such as Visual Basic, Perl, Python, XML, Mathematica, etc.

References


