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English Idiom Usage:

A Discussion of Common Mistakes Made by Japanese Learners

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This paper will discuss four common errors made by Japanese learners when writing English idiomatic expressions: category analysis, subject analysis, metaphor analysis, and problems resulting from ingrained learning. The examples used were selected from the written work of Japanese university students, and it is intended that an increased understanding of the source of their difficulties will facilitate more effective instruction into a critically important area of English language competency. For the purposes of this paper no distinction will be made between idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs, and both will be included in the category of *multiword units*.

As Moon (1999) tells us, “idiom” is a wide-ranging term that is often applied to a broad range of multiword items, and Liu (2003) points out that specific definitions of what is considered an idiom vary depending on both the context and on the scholar. As a working definition, this paper will use the general but widely applied understanding of idiom as “a set expression of two or more words that has a meaning other than the literal definitions of the individual components.” For example, “let the cat out of the

bag” is a common expression used in English, which means “to tell a secret.” Despite an understanding of the constituent parts of this phrase, the intended meaning is not clear unless the listener is already familiar with the expression. Idioms present challenges for all users of the language, including native speakers, and Nippold (1991, p. 101) believes that “there is no clear point in human development when it can be said that idioms have been mastered.” Naturally their understanding is particularly problematic for the L2 learner.

In spite of the inherent difficulties they present, idiomatic expressions are a critical component to any true fluency in the language, as they are used extensively in both informal and formal communication. As multiword units, idioms belong to a category which research suggests could account for over 50 percent of a native speaker’s lexicon (Erman and Warren, 2000). Similarly, Jackendoff (1997) estimates that the number of memorized expressions could be comparable to the number of individual words.

Conceding the difficulty of such assessments, were the actual numbers even but half of these estimates, the role that idioms and their multiword counterparts play in language acquisition would still be undeniable. Therefore, it would be prudent for language teachers to rethink the value that multiword expressions have to their students. We can no longer afford to treat them as lexical sidebars occupying a dusty niche rarely visited

by formal instruction. Nor should we view them as anomalies that are too difficult to teach because, by their very definition, their meanings cannot be easily explained. On the contrary, their inaccessibility to the L2 student argues for increased attention rather than the opposite.

An understanding of multiword units is a critical component of English competency and students should receive dedicated and focused instruction in their use. An increased understanding of how students misuse these expressions will hopefully prove useful in realizing this goal.

I. Mistakes Due to Category Analysis

“Mistakes Due to Category Analysis” refers to the misidentification of a grammatical element within the idiom which then results in an incorrect application. Here we will address two such problems: “Identification of Prepositions and Adverbs in Phrasal Verbs” and “Identification of Nouns and Adjectives.”

Ia. Identification of Prepositions and Adverbs in Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are multiword units comprised of a verb and a preposition, a verb and an adverb, or a verb with both an adverb and a preposition. Below is a very short list of

representative examples.

Verbs Followed by Prepositions

get at
call on
run over
settle for
look into
guard against

Verbs Followed by Adverbs

log on
give in
show up
move out
blow over
play along

These expressions are often used idiomatically and have found extensive use in the English language. Unfortunately they lead to a great deal of confusion as English learners find it difficult to identify whether the particle following the verb functions as a preposition or as an adjective. Please note the following examples of a standard application of the phrasal verb *chime in*, and a nonstandard usage written by a student.

1a. standard usage: He always chimes in on our conversation.

1b. nonstandard student usage: He always chimes in our conversation.

“Chime in” means “to interrupt or to intervene.” In the first sentence “in” is functioning as an adverb. However in sentence 1b, the student has most likely categorized “in” as a

preposition and therefore incorrectly followed it directly with a noun phrase (in this case “our conversation”), omitting the preposition “on.”

We see the same type of identification error with a similar phrasal verb “horn in,” which means to interject oneself into a situation where one is not wanted.

2a. standard usage: I was surprised when she horned in on the line.

2b. nonstandard student usage: I was surprised when she horned in the line.

Again, the student has identified “in” as a preposition when it is functioning as an adverb, and failed to introduce the noun phrase with the preposition “on.”

While this error is minor with regard to how the sentence would be understood by a native speaker (and likely would avoid the notice of many), L2 learners would benefit from an awareness of the preferred construction.

Ib. Identification of Nouns and Adjectives

Another common categorical mistake is the misidentification of nouns and adjectives at the head of the phrase. As in the following, the first element of a phrase generally functions as its head:

go to Tokyo (“go” begins the verb phrase)

at night (“at” begins the prepositional phrase)

good at math (“good” begins the adjective phrase)

Misidentification of these phrases often results in structural errors. A clear example of this type of mistake can be found in the expression “long in the tooth” which is a common expression meaning “old.” Again, please note the following examples:

1a. standard usage: He is long in the tooth.

1b. nonstandard student usage: He has long in the tooth.

Because the idiom “long in the tooth” is an adjective phrase, the state of being verb “is” would be appropriate. Since the student has chosen the possessive “has,” it is highly probable that he or she interpreted the adjective phrase to be a noun phrase meaning “long teeth,” which accounts for the incorrect verb choice. The student most likely is intending to write the equivalent of, “He has long teeth.”

The same type of misidentification can be seen in example #2.

2a. standard usage: He is wet behind the ears.

2b. nonstandard student usage: He has wet behind the ears.

The idiom “wet behind the ears” is another adjective phrase used to express inexperience (as in a newborn child who has not completely dried following birth). As with example 1b, the student has most likely interpreted it as a noun phrase expressing “wetness behind the ears” and incorrectly elected to use a possessive verb.

This type of error is problematic because it can result in a communication failure. While the student most likely is aware of the expression’s meaning and was attempting to convey it idiomatically, the verb choice would lead to at least initial confusion. After processing the verb “has,” the receiver would anticipate a noun phrase to follow.

II. Mistakes Due to Subject Analysis

Some idioms are typically used to refer to people or animate subjects, while others are generally applied to inanimate subjects. Students are often unaware that an expression’s natural usage is restricted to the animate or inanimate, and therefore apply them to inappropriate subject types.

IIa. Animate Subject

An example of an “animate subject” idiom is “washed up” because it is typically

employed in the description of people and, less frequently, other animate objects such as pets or animals. English language learners who are not aware of this limitation often apply it to inanimate objects, causing unnatural constructions. It should be noted that these constructions are not incorrect from a grammatical standpoint. They are problematic in that the speaker fails in his or her attempt to employ the idiom as it is understood by native speakers, which can result in confusion or miscommunication.

1a. standard usage: The actress is washed up.

1b. nonstandard student usage: The radio is washed up.

Because “washed up” is used to refer to animate subjects, sentence 1a would be accepted as perfectly natural by a native speaker. Sentence 1b, while understandable, would be considered an odd formulation.

Iib. Inanimate Subject

Just as some idioms modify animate subjects, others are used primarily with inanimate subjects. Predictably, this too causes errors. The idiom “below the belt” is used to describe an unfair act and most likely originates from an illegal blow delivered in boxing. It refers to the act of hitting and not to the person doing the hitting. Therefore, it should not be applied to animate subjects.

1a. standard usage: Firing Jim because of his sickness was below the belt.

1b. nonstandard student usage: She was below the belt.

Because example 1a refers to the act of firing Jim, the sentence would be received and interpreted as intended. Sentence 1b, however, would tend to create confusion because the idiom is describing a person rather than an act.

III. Mistakes Due to Metaphor Analysis

Errors in verb choice often occur because students do not understand when an inanimate object refers to a person metaphorically. Here we will address students' problems in identifying person metaphors from non-person metaphors and the resulting incorrect choice of the verbs "have" and "be."

IIIa. "Have or "Be"? (Person Metaphor)

The idiom "ball of fire" describes someone who has a great deal of energy. Thus, "ball" is used in a metaphorical context to refer to a person. However, students are often not aware that the expression is being used metaphorically and therefore assign a

possessive verb to it.

1a. standard usage: He is a ball of fire.

1b. nonstandard student usage: He has a ball of fire.

Because of the mistaken analysis of the person metaphor and resulting verb choice, sentence 1b could be met with confusion. After processing “has,” the listener would no longer anticipate a person metaphor and would expect a more literal object or non-person metaphor to follow. Other metaphorical expressions (“wet blanket,” “chip off the old block,” etc.) are subject to the same type of misuse.

IIIb. “Have” or “Be”? (Non-Person Metaphor)

Similarly, mistakes result when students use “be” instead of “have” with non-person metaphors.

The idiom “(have) two left feet” means “to lack dancing ability.” This time, however, “two left feet” refers to body parts and not to the person as a whole. Therefore it is not a person metaphor.

2a. standard usage: I have two left feet.

2b. nonstandard student usage: I am two left feet.

Since “two left feet” is a non-person metaphor, sentence 2a is perfectly acceptable, while sentence 2b would be received as an odd construction. Other idioms that are subject to this type of mistake are “cold feet,” “tin ear,” “a silver tongue,” etc.

IV. Mistakes Due to Ingrained Learning

“Get or “Go”?”

Sometimes idiom errors occur as the result of incorrect assumptions resulting from past learning. Please look at the two following examples using “get” and “go.”

1a. standard usage: He went off the deep end.

1b. nonstandard student usage: He got off the deep end.

The idiom “(go) off the deep end” means to lose one’s sense of control, or to act irrationally. The reference most likely is to plunging into the deep end of a swimming pool. Because the action involves motion, the idiom calls for the verb “went.” However,

students often incorrectly select “get” with this type of expression.

This error, however, is probably not one of misidentification. The mistake most likely has its origin in the fact that Japanese students learn “get off” early in their education and they simply apply it by rote in inappropriate situations.

Conclusion

Due to their ubiquitous presence in the English language and their increasingly identifiable significance to the competency of the L2 learner, idiomatic expressions should receive serious attention in the English classroom. However, idioms are highly colloquial in nature and do not always adhere to the conventional grammatical rules learned by Japanese students. Mistakes often occur when English learners do not properly identify the idioms’ component parts, and when they try to apply previously learned rules to them. It is therefore necessary for language teachers to dedicate increased classroom time specifically to their instruction and design curricula that specifically address the causes of common mistakes made with multiword expressions. Hopefully by expanding the research into the causes of these mistakes we will be able to improve the level of student comprehension of multiword expressions, and of English language instruction as a whole.

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